

DECEMBER 2022

AUSTRALIA

PLAYBOY

EMBARK ON A JOURNEY

MICHELLE JANIKIAN'S
YUCATAN PENINSULA
EGO TRIP

BEHIND THE LENS

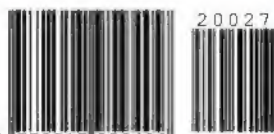
WITH
INSPIRATIONAL
NADIA LEE
COHEN

Stiff
COMPETITION
WE DIVE INTO
SOME FUZZY
PUBIC WARS

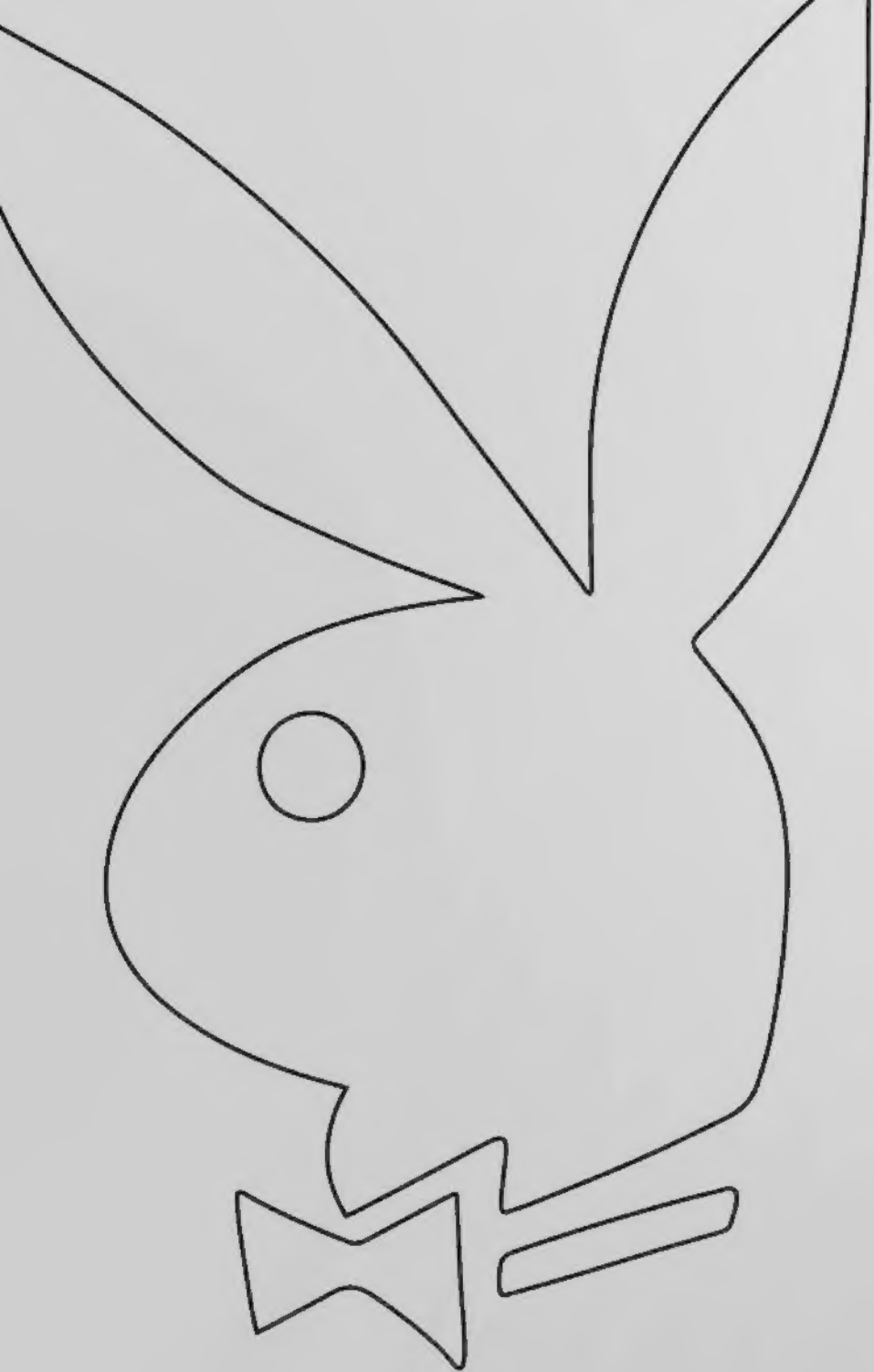
INTELLIGENT
& AMBITIOUS

Sarah Page

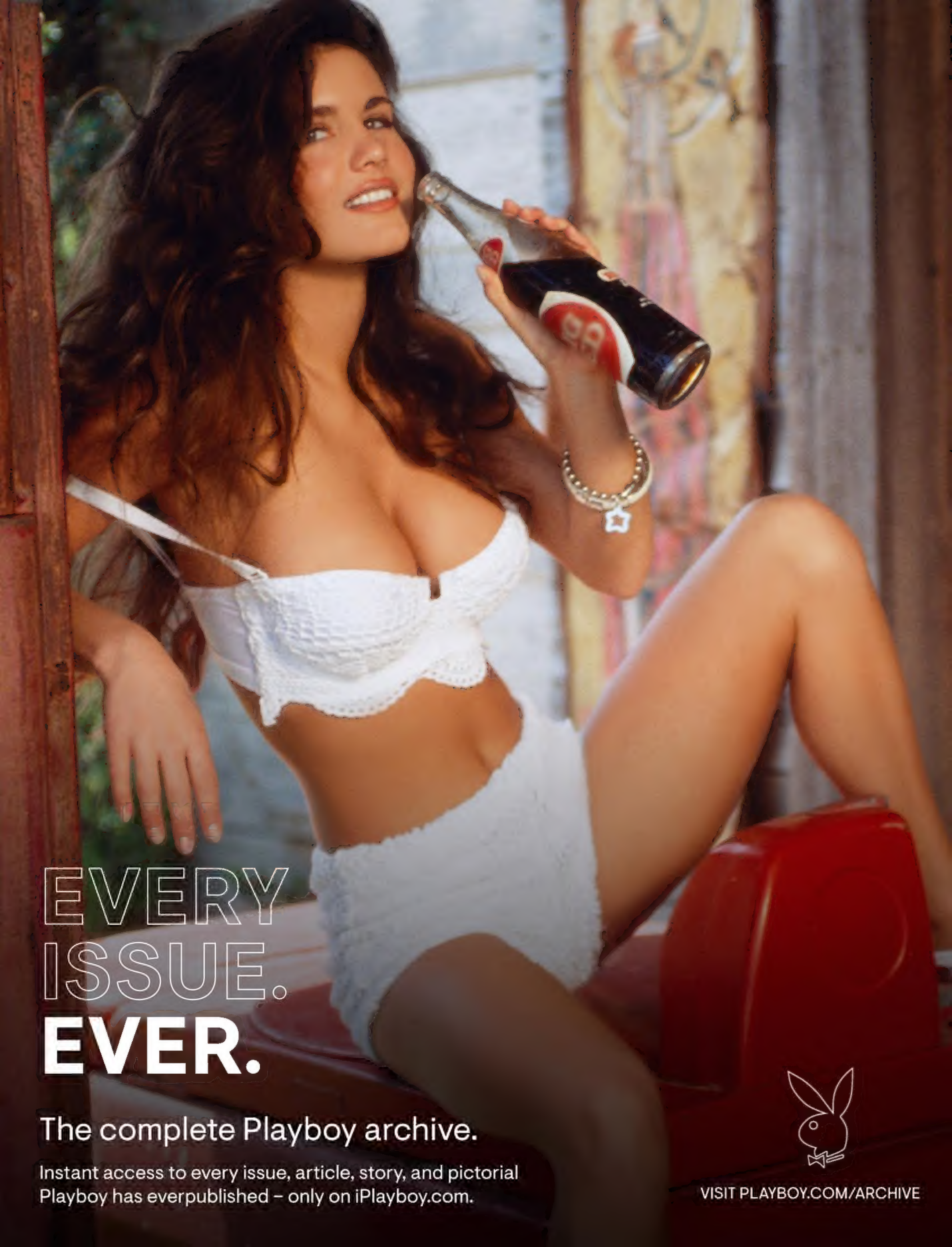
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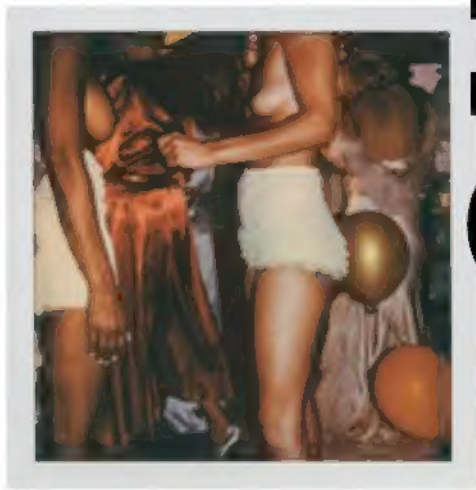
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Behind

Nadia Lee Cohen, the mastermind behind both this issue's nostalgic cover and the ad campaign for Playboy's new fragrance, Make the Cover (coming March 2020), creates work with the instinct of a storyteller. That may explain why the British artist gravitates toward eccentric and striking characters who can effortlessly weave a narrative into her cinematic portraits. For the Equality Issue's cover story, Once a Playmate, Always a Playmate, Cohen used her lens to "focus a spotlight on age and photograph something I consider to be underrepresented in popular culture," she tells us. Cohen invited five Playmates across six decades — 1963 through 2012 — to help bring her vision to life. "I wanted to celebrate the original Playmates who helped shape and pioneer the brand."



WORLD OF PLAYBOY



the



Lens

Playboy's Freedom Fighters

In November, PEN America honored First Amendment attorney Theodore J. Boutrous Jr. with its Distinguished Leadership Award in recognition of his free speech advocacy. He has worked with comedian and 2018 *Playboy Interview* subject Kathy Griffin, who called Boutrous after the Department of Justice investigated her for conspiracy to assassinate the president; reporter Jim Acosta, who refused to yield his questioning of Trump; and *playboy* White House correspondent Brian Karem, whose press pass was revoked by Press Secretary Stephanie Grisham without cause. In August, Boutrous successfully sued the White House, arguing Karem's suspension violated the First and Fifth Amendments. We congratulate Boutrous on his award.



Giddy Up

For this edition of *Man in His Domain*, Marissa Moss attempts to capture just how captivating Orville Peck, the elusive cowboy, truly is. To further explore the masked musician's origins, Simon Hanselmann, creator of last issue's *Megg's Pleasure*, stepped in to illustrate an original comic (right). Visit Playboy.com to see more.



The Art Outsiders

"Sometimes outsiders make the most powerful insiders," says senior editor Elizabeth Suman, who united French "wallpaper artist" JR and *New York* magazine senior art critic Jerry Saltz for an in-depth conversation in our photo feature, *Portraits for the People*. Forgoing a traditional interview for a private tour of JR's exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum, the two men bonded over their unconventional approaches to their crafts. "JR didn't go to art school and is becoming one of the most recognizable artists in the world," says Suman. "Jerry was a truck driver until he was 41, and recently won a Pulitzer. Each, in his own way, is bringing art to a new demographic and challenging what the art community could, and should, look like." The show's centerpiece, *The Chronicles of New York City*, features 1,128 New Yorkers displayed across 32 feet of museum real estate. The mural becomes even more impactful when viewers realize it's connected to an AR app, JR:murals, which features audio clips of each subject. Turn to page 118 to download the app and hear the *playboy* pages tell their story.



Remembering Stephanie Morris

Stephanie Morris, a talented photo editor who spent nearly 30 years working for *playboy*, passed away this fall. "I don't think Stephanie knew how good she was at her job," reflects Marilyn Grabowski, another former *playboy* photo editor. "We had a great team, and a lot of credit goes to Stephanie."



The Blond(ie) Bunny

Just a few years before Debbie Harry got her big break as the unapologetic frontwoman of Blondie, she did a stint as a Bunny at the New York *Playboy* Club. In her recent memoir, *Face It*, Harry touches on everything from Bunny-hood to bankruptcy to the band's breakup. To read more about her experience wearing the ears and tail, check out *Diamond Days* (page 209).

Stiff COMPETITION

WHEN AN AMBITIOUS IMITATOR
TOOK AIM AT PLAYBOY, THE
MAGAZINE WAS FORCED TO
CONFRONT A HAIRY ISSUE

BY PATTY FARMER

The Playboy Rabbit Head found itself in unfamiliar territory in 1969: *Penthouse* ads. Bob Guccione, editor-publisher of the upstart British magazine, had decided to take his publication to the States, and he wanted advertisers to know exactly what he was targeting. "We're going rabbit-hunting," read the cut line below an unsubtle image of the Rabbit in a rifle's crosshairs. Hugh Hefner's hugely successful formula for PLAYBOY, it seemed, was too tempting for imitators to ignore.

Guccione's Rabbit hunt, and Hefner's response to it, soon escalated into what became punningly known as the "pubic wars" — a clash in which the two print titans battled for full-frontal supremacy of the publishing industry's lucrative nude-mag niche.

...

Guccione deserves credit: PLAYBOY was a smart target. Since its December 1953 debut, circulation had climbed steadily, reaching 5.7 million by December 1969. Over those 16 years, Hefner had captured the market — other men's magazines were to PLAYBOY what fleas are to a bear. By daring to be more risqué, PLAYBOY had left *Esquire*, its inspiration and nearest competitor, in the dust. As *Esquire* editor Clay Felker bluntly put it to *Rolling Stone*, "PLAYBOY had out-titted us."

In 1969 Guccione saw a similar opportunity and decided to take a shot at Hef, publishing the first U.S. issue of *Penthouse* that September. (It had been a U.K. lad mag for four years.) That February, the 147-year-old *Saturday Evening Post* had effectively gone out of business. These two





milestones are more closely related than one might think. At the dawn of the 1970s, the industry was rapidly changing: Old-time general interest, family-friendly magazines were losing their readership to television; even venerable *Life* magazine, long a publishing staple, would switch from a weekly to an intermittent schedule in 1972. But specialty magazines, those covering subjects from sports to science to automobiles, were growing in popularity, and the highest growth area was the one least likely to be served by TV. This was the PLAYBOY audience: mostly young to middle-aged men who wanted to look at semi-naked models and read intellectually stimulating short stories and nonfiction. That format, combining revealing photos of women with excellent editorial fare, was Hefner's masterstroke — and what Guccione sought to replicate.

• • •

The Brooklyn-born, New Jersey-raised Guccione had originally set out to become a painter and, like Hefner, had tried his hand at cartooning, though he eventually became a photographer. Living in London in the early 1960s, he and his wife launched a photo service that sold provocative pinups of young women via mail order (\$2, or the British equivalent, for 10 pictures). Having had his cartoons rejected by virtually every magazine in town, he resolved to launch his own title to publish them. An informal study of London newsstands convinced him that the most successful periodical in England was the Chicago-based PLAYBOY. "I thought, I'll do a magazine using the same formula — pretty girls, highbrow editorial — but aimed at a British audience," Guccione says in an interview included in *Filthy Gorgeous*, the 2013 documentary about his life. To woo prospective investors, "I brought a copy of PLAYBOY around with me, and I said, 'Just imagine this with the name *Penthouse* on it.'"

Premiering in England in 1965, *Penthouse* was a hit. Guccione gradually worked out his plan to launch in the States. He connected with the largest magazine distributor in America, the Curtis Circulation Company, which by that time was keen to find new profit channels — it had just lost a major cash cow with the demise of *The Saturday Evening Post*.

Guccione's pitch wasn't far off from his eventual product: He copied PLAYBOY practically feature for feature. Instead of a Centerfold showcasing a monthly Playmate, Guccione's foldout spotlighted a monthly Pet; where PLAYBOY had the long running *Little Annie Fanny* comic, *Penthouse* installed *Oh, Wicked Wanda*, a rather grungy knockoff of Harvey Kurtzman's pop culture classic. Guccione launched his own Penthouse Club in London in response to Hefner's Playboy Club empire. Even the word penthouse stemmed from Playboy history, being the title and setting of Hefner's first late-night TV series, *Playboy's Penthouse*.

So what did *Penthouse* give readers that was new? More skin, more heat. The major weapon in Guccione's arsenal was his willingness to depict what PLAYBOY had not.

"In the wake of the so-called free-love '60s, *Penthouse* chose to break open the market and distinguish itself from PLAYBOY by being raunchier: more overtly sexual photographs, pubic pictures, bizarre letters to the editor, models who ran the gamut as opposed to PLAYBOY's girl-next-door types," says David Friend, author of *The Naughty Nineties: The Triumph of the American Libido*. Although it flirted with pubic hair on a couple of occasions, including a pictorial of actress and dancer Paula Kelly in

August 1969, PLAYBOY had never shown an explicit frontal shot. Guccione saw the open door and walked through it.

The February 1970 *Penthouse* showed a hint of pubic hair in one pictorial, followed by several pubic-hair-revealing shots in the April edition, causing small-town censors to yank the issue off newsstands. Censors may have been incensed, but readers were beguiled, and by September 1972 *Penthouse's* sales had climbed to 2.2 million — nearly 10 times what it had started at just three years earlier. That was still less than a third of PLAYBOY's circulation, which had hit an all-time high of more than 7 million, but Hefner eventually came to feel adjustments were needed.

"At first Hef tried to avoid engaging or responding," remembers Dick Rosen zweig, Hefner's right-hand man who had been with the company since 1958. "He definitely tried to convey a 'So what?' attitude in the beginning."

But soon enough PLAYBOY was showing more and more of the pubic area — territory that had previously been obscured or blocked. In the January 1971 issue, Hefner allowed a peek of blonde pubic hair in Liv Lindeland's Playmate pictorial and a year later went full frontal with a tasteful Centerfold of Playmate Marilyn Cole. Much more provocative poses followed. This "arms" race—not to mention legs, breasts and buttocks — evolved beyond full-frontal nudity to other arenas previously unexplored by PLAYBOY: fetishism, girl-on-girl, women touching themselves.

"The point was cultural and aesthetic but also market driven," says Friend via e-mail. "The PLAYBOY philosophy, according to *Penthouse*, was, in effect, your father's ethos — sexuality disguised. *Penthouse* was for younger and more liberated (read lowbrow, low-forehead) readers, epitomized by the crotch shots. PLAYBOY was somewhat crotchety in comparison and hid its treasures amid serious fiction and big-name bylines." To use Felker's construction, *Penthouse* wanted to out crotch PLAYBOY.

"Hef was conflicted," remembers former art director Kerig Pope about the magazine's new direction, "but the art department made it clear they were in support of showing more."

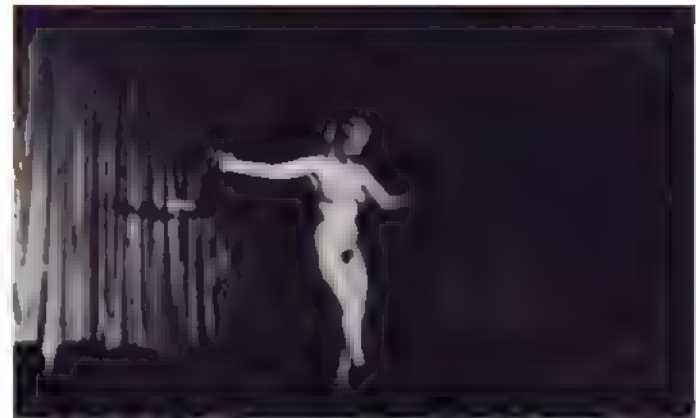
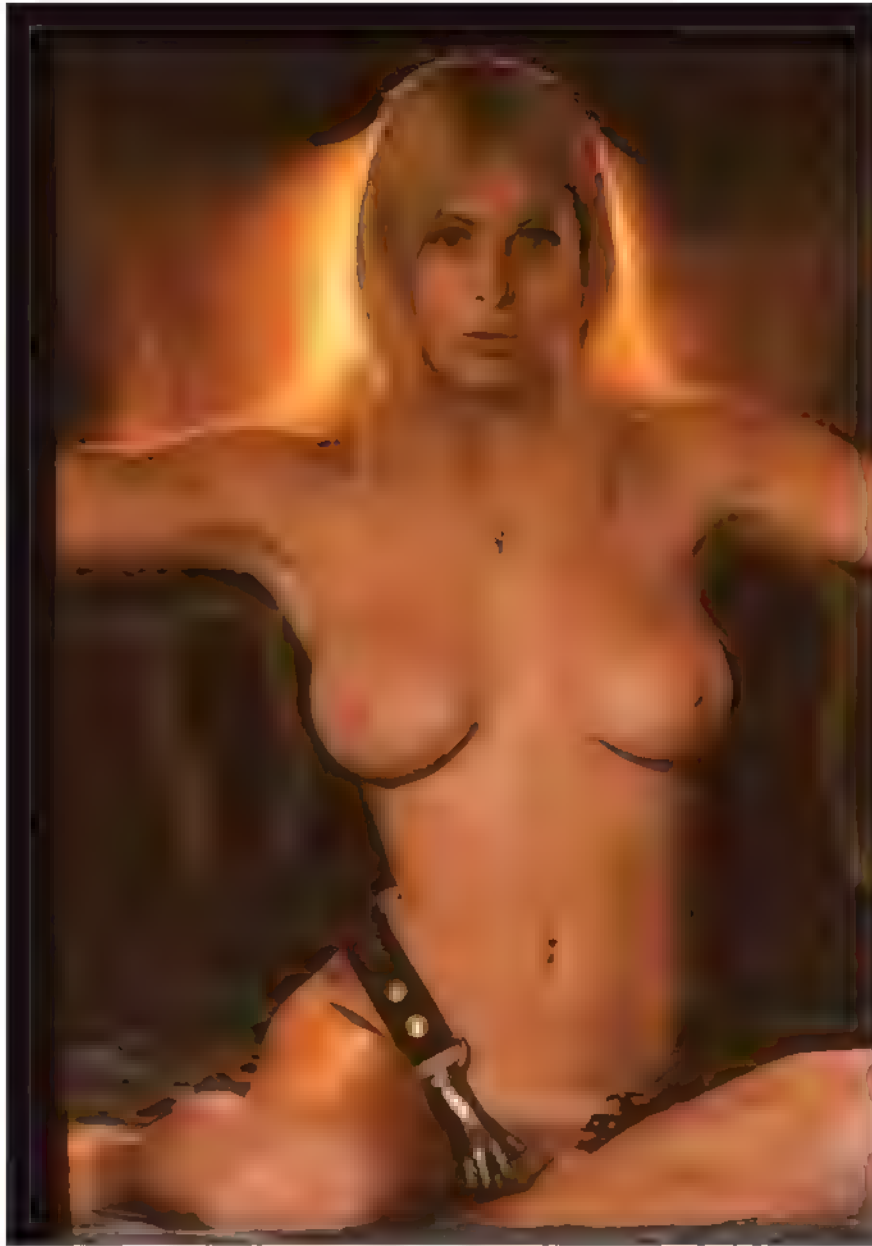
The photography was far from the only PLAYBOY staple affected by the changes. "The whole book was 'heated up,' " from

fashion to articles, as Thomas Weyr recounts in *Reaching for Paradise*, his extensively researched volume on the company. The shift even applied to LeRoy Neiman's famous Femlin drawings. "An editorial decision was relayed to me to introduce pubic hair on my lovable, wholesome creation," writes Neiman in the 50th anniversary collection celebrating his work. "At first I resisted, mainly because it posed a design problem. Eventually I came up with a solution regarding the pubic hair matter...a simple black triangle."

Although the rise of *Penthouse* seems the proximate cause for the changes, Hefner claimed there were other considerations governing his actions. "At the top of the list was the more permissive attitude in films," he told *Rolling Stone*. *Deep Throat*, after all, had come out in 1972, taking porn mainstream. "The decision to make the magazine what I call, not more permissive but more mature, is a matter of what we felt, in our judgment, our part of society was ready for."

• • •

It wasn't just *Penthouse* that was crowding the field of men's magazines: *Coq*, *Players*, *Dude* and *Genesis* were just a few



Previous spread: Paula Kelly's August 1969 pictorial is often credited as PLAYBOY's first display of pubic hair. Top left: Liv Lindeland's exposed tuft in January 1971 was a Playmate first, in this shot from her Playmate of the Year feature, she continues the trend. Top right: January 1972 Playmate Marilyn Cole, shown here in a photo from her 1973 Playmate of the Year pictorial, was the first full-frontal Centerfold. Right: August 1959 marks the true earliest appearance of pubic hair in PLAYBOY; the photo was retouched so the dancer's uncovered pubis might be mistaken for a G-string.

of the titles to enter the fray. Gallery was an even more direct clone of PLAYBOY than Penthouse had ever tried to be, renting an office less than a mile from Hefner's staff. "I guess I've been flattered more sincerely — and blatantly — than any other magazine publisher in history," Hefner once quipped. In 1972 Playboy purchased the French title *Lui* and changed it to *Oui*, hoping that this younger, bolder, kinkier and more "continental" version of PLAYBOY could dig directly into Penthouse's circulation. (After a blockbuster first year, *Oui* sank steadily into the red before Playboy parted with it in 1981.) Then, in 1974, Larry Flynt's *Hustler* arrived, quickly establishing that Flynt wouldn't hesitate to go beyond what either Hefner or Guccione could abide.

For Hefner, the "war" culminated in late 1975 with back-to-back controversial covers: Two bare-breasted models embraced under the teaser line SAPPHO: STUNNING PORTRAITS OF WOMEN IN LOVE on the October cover; a seated woman, one hand down her panties, blouse and legs spread wide, graced the November issue. Readers may have welcomed the more suggestive content, but many companies buying full-page ads did not. "PLAYBOY's foray into explicit shots, lesbianism and female masturbation triggered outrage among advertisers, who deluged its offices with complaints about obscenity," Steven

Watts writes in his Hefner biography, *Mr. Playboy*. There was \$40 million in annual ad revenue at stake, a Playboy executive fumed. Hefner decided to change course. "Gentlemen, we have lost our compass," he declared, telling his team to cool down the content. "I [told] my staff we would not go down the road of imitating our imitators," he later said.

That December he promised shareholders and newsstands alike that moving forward his covers would be less risqué. Besides keeping advertisers happy, there was perhaps another simple reason behind the revised stance: "Hefner's heart was not in the raunch war," as Weyr put it.

...

The pubic wars were, in Hefner's own words, "much ado about foliage." Considering the tumultuous era from the perspective of 2013, Hef remarked, "It's almost comical to look back now at all the fuss over pubic hair." Indeed, photos that 50 years ago qualified as racy today seem practically innocuous, even quaint; in the intervening decades, attitudes and norms have changed significantly.

Those changes have naturally affected the business, though readers may be surprised: Today in PLAYBOY's pages, how much skin (and hair) is shown is a decision made not by the editor but by the model — a practice that is perhaps the biggest reveal of all. ■





SKYE BLUE

Instagram @onlyskyedotcom

Photography by Moss Von Faustenberg | @mossy_deschanel

Designer @leonardcondemine

Location @ragdollpinkpalace







We're happy to have you featured in Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started? I started 8 years ago when I moved to NYC to go to fashion school, I quickly became a model and was signed to an agency before playboy plus reached out to me and I started exploring how much I loved doing nude work!

Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime? I always take a bath after a long day, watch anime, or cook myself a meal like my mother used to make for me!

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? When you live in a world where you are valued by your looks, it breeds a lot of desire to be seen past the surface level. When I'm seen for more than just my looks it brings me a level of self-esteem that's unparalleled!

What are some of the biggest misconceptions people have about what you do? A lot of people think I must be a socialite, extremely outgoing and partying all the time! It's actually quite opposite, I'd prefer to stay in bed and watch old movies and anime rather than having a night out.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? It means creating what I want to see in whatever way I'd like to see it, with no restrictions on the art I want to show the world.

We absolutely love your Instagram, your content is very dynamic, inspirational, and downright sexy, could you perhaps tell us what your personal experience as an influencer has been like? When you're constantly deleted, it makes it pretty hard to do so! But it's brought me such amazing opportunities from working with fashion designers and photographers to being called famous by my tv repair man haha!

3 things that you can't go a day without. Cell phone, camera, coffee.

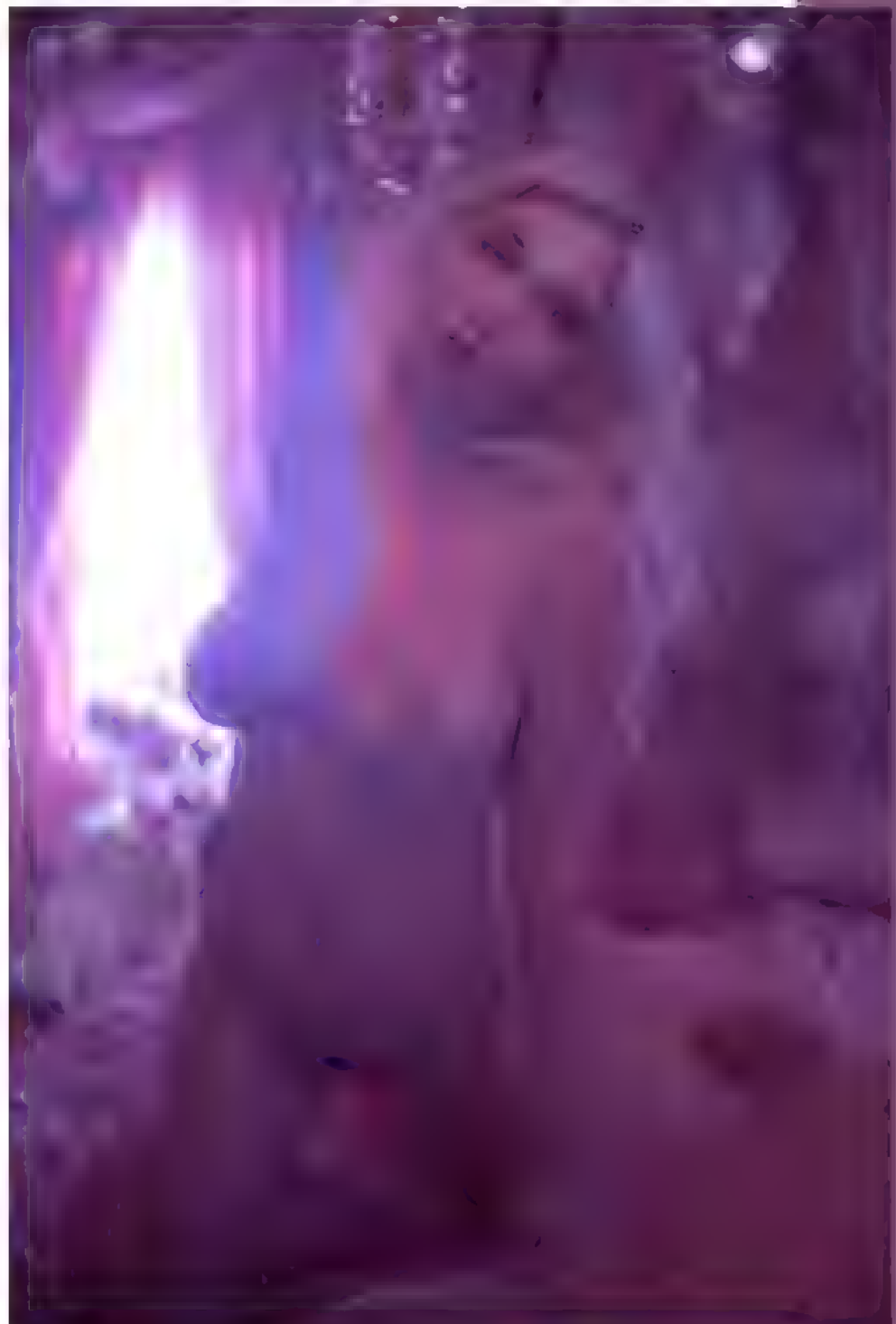
What about those crazy DMs you must receive! Care to share a few funny stories regarding those? The funniest one I could think of was when I was messaging a fake account of me to change their photos to someone else, they started telling me to change mine and that I should be so grateful to have someone pretend to be me!

Now we're sure you experience a lot of male attention on and offline, any advice you would like to give to men out there who are hoping to catch your eye the right way? Making me laugh can go a long way! I love acts of chivalry and being brought little mementos to make me think of the person, surefire way to get my attention.

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? A foul odor and being rude to service workers.

That said, what advice would you have to give to all women out there when it comes to love and relationships? Communication! Every issue I've ever had has always been fixed by talking it out, I'm and out of bed.

Thank you so much for sitting down with us and letting us get to know you! Any last words for our readers out there? I hope you guys enjoy! I love bringing my artistic flare to my modeling, and it means the world to have so many people support it.









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A surreal illustration featuring a large mushroom with a textured, orange-brown cap and a white stem. A green, alien-like creature with a large, dark, circular eye is positioned to the right of the mushroom. The creature has a long, thin neck and a small, dark, circular body. The background is a gradient of pink and orange. The text "bliss your heart" is written in a white, serif font, with "bliss" on the first line and "your heart" on the second line. The text is centered and overlaps the green creature and the mushroom.

bliss your
heart



With psilocybin
once again in the
running to become
a legitimate treat-
ment for anxiety, we
sent a writer deep
into the Mexican
jungle to face her
fears. Did she
find inner peace?

BY MICHELLE JANIKIAN

ILLUSTRATION BY MAX LOEFFLER

I arrive in a van with six other Americans after traveling on a long, stomach-turning dirt road to the heart of the jungle outside Playa del Carmen, Mexico. The resort is a maze of wooden boardwalks, but the foliage still creeps through and grazes my limbs. We are led, one by one, down overgrown paths that open into large event spaces, including the appropriately dubbed Buddha Hall, where three days of transformative psilocybin ceremonies will take place.

We're a total of 20 participants. We eat dinner together in a decadent, palace-like setting and play Two Truths and a Lie to break the ice before heading to bed. It's still early. I lie in my room — a private, nearly square enclosure with wall-length windows overlooking dense greenery — while I patiently wait for daylight.

The next morning is a blur. There's dosing information, contracts to sign and the group activity of "intentions setting"— a discussion during which almost everyone cries, myself included. I reveal my experiences with drug abuse and depression, the story of a friend's death and my recovery afterward. It comes out easily because everyone around me is emotional; they have their own reasons for being here.

First-person research for my upcoming book, *Your Psilocybin Mushroom Companion*, is what has led me to the Buena Vida Psilocybin Retreat in the Yucatán Peninsula's tropical wonderland. The tag line of this roving retreat

is "Embark on a journey of a lifetime with the help of magical fungi."

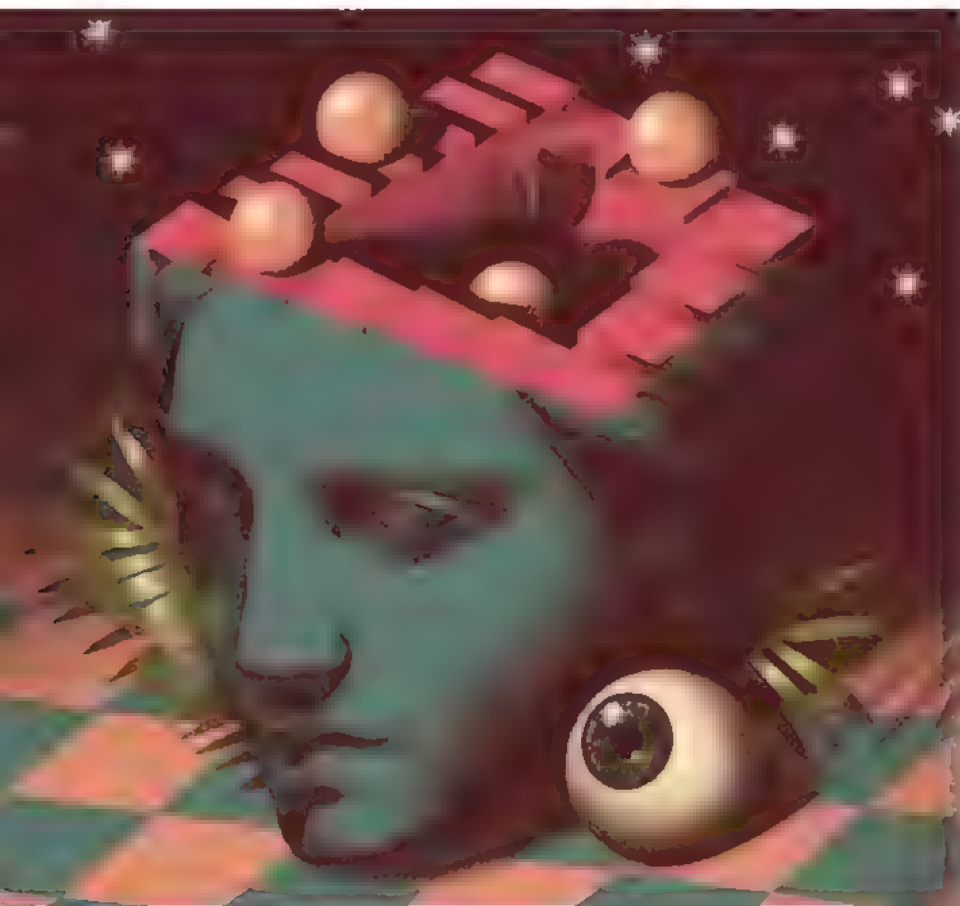
For the 19 others, their journeys to this moment may not have started with a simple Google search as mine did, but I suspect they're here because of the hard-to-ignore attention psilocybin has received of late — in particular, the reports that this psychoactive compound, found in more than 100 species of mushroom of the genus *Psilocybe*, may assist in treating several mental health issues and disorders. Having paid \$3,000 for the weeklong experience, they're here to begin healing from personal traumas I can't begin to understand.

Although psychedelic drugs are most closely associated with the hippie culture of the 1960s, interest in them has remained consistent over the years. In 2016, the *Journal of Psychopharmacology* published two studies that determined that doses of psilocybin, which alters perception, eased cancer patients' distress. In 2017, the Global Drug Survey named mushrooms the safest drug on the planet. New York University and Johns Hopkins University recently conducted clinical trials, the results of which lend credence to the argument that psilocybin could work as a therapy for otherwise treatment-resistant depression, addiction and anxiety. While the Drug Enforcement Administration still lists the mushroom compound as a Schedule I substance, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has designated it a "breakthrough therapy," opening the door for expedited clinical trials to be conducted by Compass Pathways, a mental health research firm. Why wouldn't we, with the proper guidance from this retreat's shamans, see positive results?

The Buena Vida retreat — founded in 2015 by Amanda Schendel, a "psychedelic expert" whose previous careers include positions in sales and comedy — maintains that its goal is "to provide safe access to healing plant medicines within the context of ritual and ceremony." Thus, before the first of the three mushroom ceremonies commences, we're encouraged to light a candle on an altar — a small stage adorned with objects of significance and offerings to the spirits and elements of the earth — and write down our intentions. I scribble a laundry list of emotional goals I would like to achieve over the next six hours, which is my first mistake, and wait for my name to be called. When it is, I'm given a fragrant spray of *agua de florida* to purify my spirit. The shaman proceeds to sit me down. I get chills as my doubt about her power fades with the smoke from the sacred tobacco she's wafting. I'm given a clay mug of mushroom tea. The serving is one and a half grams.

The aroma of palo santo ("holy wood") burning with sage engulfs me. My tea is steeping and my mind races as I ready myself on my yoga mat. The 20 of us drink our tea in unison. Most of the group then lie down and close their eyes, surrendering to the medicine. I remain sitting up, partly to watch people's reactions and partly because I find myself enchanted by the shaman's echoing voice.

Even though I know the lighting is dim, it suddenly feels unbearably bright. My limbs start to become limp, exhausted. I chuckle at the feeling, lie back and close my eyes. But instead of





finding peace or feeling blissed out, my mind is chaotic and my thoughts are negative. *Why do people do this, again?* I feel nauseated as the drug rumbles through my insides. The shaman's voice turns haunting, vibrating through the pavilion. I'm struggling to let go, hesitant to allow the mushrooms to do their work.

The anxiety I've felt leading up to this trip — anxiety specifically tied to writing my book — grows vicious. I worry that I'm not qualified to write a mushroom guide. I'm worthless. I'm stupid. I try sitting up and opening my eyes, but the thoughts continue, and I start to cry. There are no trippy visuals to distract me. I want to get out, to be alone, but I signed a waiver promising I would stay in the ceremony space. A facilitator brings me tissues and sits with me.

I try again to go back inward. I lie down and close my eyes, but the overriding voice in my head screams at me to kill myself. I have to sit up. I can't handle it.

These drugs are dangerous, I think, and I feel the weight of everyone who may read my book and take my advice. It's too much pressure. I keep bawling. A mountain of soggy tissues grows beside me. I'm a fraud.

It's another four hours before my negative thoughts dry up. Facilitators bring around a tray of fruit, signaling the end of the ceremony. I leave as a shell of myself, brewing a crying-induced headache. I wonder if other people went through the same thing, but everyone else seems effervescent at dinner time. We eat in a space that resembles a spooky, overgrown Chinese restaurant. Some of my favorite foods are on the table — falafel, pita, hummus — but eating seems foreign. I listen to others talk about their relaxing experiences, their crazy visions. Am I broken?

The next morning I'm raw, and Advil can't touch my headache. I sleep through yoga and rush to get changed so I don't miss breakfast. Surviving today will require coffee. Immediately after breakfast, we have an "integration meeting" on the rooftop terrace, which glitters with Indian teahouse-style decorations. I strain to get comfortable as I absorb everyone's journeys. Most describe good trips. When it's my turn, I start crying again. I suggest I need to talk to a facilitator one-on-one. People are understanding. The group moves on.

I continue to feel exposed; tears flood at the simplest thoughts. When I try talking to others I feel a bit better, less alone. In the afternoon I swim with some people in a cenote (a limestone swimming hole) at the center of the grounds, though I still feel distant. After dinner I join everyone for what they're calling an "ecstatic dance party." We spread glow sticks on the floor, and I start to move around, pushing out my heavy energy with the music's beat. Tears again rush down my face.

I feel lighter by the day of the second ceremony. I make it to yoga class but bail halfway through meditation to take a walk in the woods with a woman around my age from the Midwest and a man at the other end of his 30s from Denver. It feels good to connect with them. I am at ease.

Our second mushroom ceremony kicks off while the sun is still out, around three p.m. I ditch the pre-ceremony acupuncture and sound bath to form my own ritual: swimming in the cenote with some new friends, a social worker in his 50s and a scientist in his 30s. I take a shower and call my partner before skipping off to the ceremony with the scientist. We set up our yoga mats near a Wall Street guy with whom I've bonded over our shared New Jersey roots. I'm feeling more comfortable and less anxious this time. I go to the altar before the ceremony and jot

down my intention — simply “I love you.” Then I wait, much more calmly than yesterday, to collect my mushroom tea. This round, I drink two and a half grams.

A nature walk is offered during this ceremony, and an hour or so into the experience I feel ready to explore. My wanderlust is partially brought on by the scientist, who seems to be having a negative reaction. The shaman sings over him and facilitators hold him down as he thrashes in distress. I’m worried, but I’m also sure he’ll be okay.

With a small group and a facilitator, I stroll down rickety wooden planks through the jungle. We hold on to one another as we stop to examine trees and discuss their personalities like kids playing make-believe. The sun beams through the foliage the way it does just before dusk, hues of gold sparkling off the tropical leaves. At some point we run into another group of nature walkers, and together we venture to admire the cenote. We’re told swimming is forbidden. We lament, because it’s hot and humid.

The banker from New Jersey finds me

“It’s so good to see you!” he says enthusiastically.

He reports that he just came back from losing his ego and relates how terrifying it was.

“I feel like I’ll never be depressed again,” he exclaims. “It all feels so irrelevant now.”

We head up a path of mosaic chakras to a wild and bright pavilion. Every inch is covered in hand-painted images of Buddhism. Lying on the cool stone ground, we watch with compassion, randomly chuckling, as ants skitter. The laughter echoes around me, fills my belly and makes me feel connected to these strangers in a way I’ve always struggled with. We’re not that different, a voice inside me says. I don’t have to be an outsider.

We return to the ceremony space to find the scientist coming out of hell. He’s still scared, and I struggle to comfort him.

“If that’s what it’s like to die, I’m even more afraid,” he tells me. I look at him deeply but don’t know what to say. He’s contradicting everything I’ve learned about the death of one’s ego. Wasn’t it supposed to be mystical?

We’re politely asked to be quiet. We go back to our separate spots and lie down for the remainder of the ceremony. I feel great waves of self-acceptance and love—emotions I couldn’t even fathom during the first ceremony. As the session ends, I’m more content and confident. At dinner, I consume more guava than is healthy to eat.

I wake up the next morning feeling elated, enlightened even. We’re scheduled to take a break from tripping and go on an excursion outside the dense jungle. We’re chauffeured to cenotes and beach clubs. I somehow feel comfortable and connected to everything around me.

The following day, I feel invincible ahead of our final ceremony. Opening up during the group session for the first time without tears, I talk to fellow participants without self-doubt. My mind clears all anxiety to make room for the present. I do yoga and meditate. The ceremony begins in the afternoon, and the familiar space is set up for us to sit in a circle, facing one another. I settle between two women I find admirable and ask to take four grams (the maximum offer is five). The facilitators have us stand and pass along the *agua de florida*, followed by a massive collective embrace. I usually dread the thought of touch, but the warmth is sweet. I set my intentions.

Teach me, I’m listening.

I’m determined to go inward — to resist resistance — so I secure my headphones queued with spiritual sounds and put my

I usually dread
the thought
of touch, but
the warmth is
sweet.

sunglasses on after finishing the tea. I focus on breathing with the hope of being taken on a vision quest, but all I see is the black inside of my eyelids. Just before longing and disappointment set in, the mushrooms transport me to a place where hardship and anxiety feel silly. I don’t see Technicolor swirls or splashes of neon, just a pure white light. I transcend my identity as a neurotic writer (with crippling impostor syndrome) and laugh out loud at my foolish problems. The white light has always been here.

When my mind wanders to my book, it’s no longer burdened by stress. *Anything I don’t know, I can learn. The only thing holding me back is me!* My book takes the shape of an epic tree that’s so tall the top isn’t visible to me. I’m in awe of it, as I would be of a giant ancient redwood. I see my life clearly — that I’ve created something beautiful. Its beauty should be cherished.

I open my eyes and survey my surroundings. I smile, recognizing all the people here with me doing their human thing, trying to comfort one another and themselves. I understand life’s beauty, even if it also seems futile while I explore another plane of reality. Some people begin to huddle. I want to be close to them, but I’m not quite ready. First, I’m granted permission to sit alone with some trees behind the altar. I’m connected to the jungle. I thank the jungle out loud, crosslegged and staring into the darkness.

When I emerge from the trees, the others welcome me back. I snuggle under a blanket with the scientist and a model from New York; it’s the closest I’ve felt to friends since I was in college almost a decade ago. We giggle and sigh. We invite others to join. I feel the light even after the visual fades.

This is why people do this. ■



ORVILLE

The man behind the mask has a voice of gold and nothing to hide. What will it take for a hidebound genre to embrace the new cowboy in town?

BY **MARISSA R. MOSS**





Man in His Domain

The aptly named “party switch” featured in every room at the Dive Motel in Nashville has four options: sex, drugs, rock & roll and sleep. Orville Peck, in a pair of horse-print tighty-whities, is boogying to the sex station, which blasts 1970s R&B while a rotating disco ball shimmers in sparkly pink hues overhead. The lack of a television, plus the bright geometric wallpaper and deep shag carpeting, signals that this renovated roadside inn isn’t the kind of place you visit for a family-friendly good time. But on this sweaty Tennessee afternoon the only thing splayed across the bed sheets is Peck’s collection of handmade lace-up masks. Gold fringe, long red fringe, short cream fringe, mid-length pink fringe. Fringe galore, yee-haw, amen.

Peck fastens on one of his masks — which he hopes never to be seen in public without — pairing it with an embroidered Nudie-style suit. Someone suggests we crank up the party switch to drugs, which features trippy lights and sounds by hip-hop forefather Grandmaster Flash. The country artist is pleased, mostly with his outfit.

“I do like the Porter Wagoner look,” Peck says, referring to the 1960s twangy crooner who made sparkly, chain-stitched getups part of his signature look. Wagoner, however — at least as far as we know — never cracked a whip while listening to “White Lines.” The musician moves to another bedroom, this one featuring side-by-side bathtubs and more shag, to snap additional photos. He stands on a bed and gives a hearty crack to a long, vintage-leather lasso.

“I’m good with a whip,” the superhero-like figure announces, an innuendo that would no doubt cause fidgeting across town on Music Row, the epicenter of Nashville’s commercial country-music industry. While fluid sexuality has long been embraced in pop music, the naughtiest images to ship out of this town tend toward a tight pantsed Luke Bryan singing about “knockin’ boots.” For someone like Peck, who is openly gay, a career in mainstream country has almost always been out of reach. Just seven years ago, in 2013, country radio penalized Kacey Musgraves for alluding to kissing girls on “Follow Your Arrow”; the song never charted higher than 43 on *Billboard*’s Country Airplay chart despite being named song of the year at the 2014 Country Music Association Awards. The genre, conventional wisdom would like you to believe, is conservative, and the only viable path for an aspiring artist who happens to embrace gayness is country-adjacent. But times are changing. Nashville is starting to demand a party switch.

“See,” Peck says, flicking the whip in an impressive wave motion with a controlled snap of the wrist, all cowboy confident, “I told y’all.”

Peck, who put out his debut LP, *Pony*, on Sub Pop in March, sings about relationships with men because that’s who he is, not because he has an agenda. The sexiness in his songs comes more from a sonic palette that sometimes sounds like Chris Isaak than from character-playing. Much has been murmured about Peck’s sexuality and his “subversive” role in country; almost as much has been made of his masked anonymity. All three aspects are captivating, for sure, but they represent a fraction of the whole: Peck speaks about being a gay man in country music not to spur a revolution but to find a role for folks like him in a genre that, historically, hasn’t



DANCING

been welcoming. If anything, he's a traditionalist at heart. Dolly Parton and Wagoner are his North Stars in a cosmos that also includes Merle Haggard. And no, Orville Peck isn't his real name, but no one makes a stink about Eillean Regina Edwards, the woman we know as Shania Twain.

His photo shoot done, Peck, now in a T-shirt on the hotel patio, smokes a cigarette through his fringe, which is parted down the middle like a set of curtains. "I'm not setting out to be an instigator," he says. "In fact, my songwriting is probably more in line with traditional country than a lot of country now."

He's not wrong: Peck's songs don't imitate Haggard's per se, but neither do those of the subgenre that includes Sam Hunt and Florida Georgia Line crooning about women, pickup trucks and beer. When compared toe-to-toe with the brocountry groups that dominate popular radio, Peck is no more indie rock than



they are hip-hop. But a fear lingers that queer singers like Peck are trying to warp country into another liberal bastion. Peck doesn't see it as a changing of the guard so much as an opportunity to be a part of what's been built.

Country's queens — Parton, in particular — were Peck's inspiration and role models, but he soon realized the genre as a whole wasn't ready to invite him in; it's an experience that's relatable for many people whose stories have been excluded from the country canon. It's not that people of color or queer people haven't had a role in Nashville's understructure; it's that their impacts have been diminished and muted. This isn't entirely the fault of country music itself. As Nadine Hubbs discusses in *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, classism has resulted in the dismissal of country as the province of unsophisticated hillbillies.

"Even just a few banjo or fiddle notes," Hubbs writes, "can suffice to convey qualities including rusticity, Southernness, stupidity or lack of sophistication, and violent bigotry, especially racism and homophobia." When the middle and elite classes use the refrain "anything but country" to describe their musical interests, they're signaling not just personal taste but economic background and political affinity. Classifying country music as the antithesis of sophistication promotes the idea that it can't be appreciated by anyone who lacks white skin and a blue collar.

"I think the stigma that country music is made by a certain type of person, and is only for a certain type of person, is something perpetuated by big-wig old white men who run record labels and feel like that's how they can keep in control," says Peck, stubbing out his cigarette. "But look at Willie Nelson. That guy's a weed-smoking gay-rights activist."

"The problem is less about homophobia. It's a chauvinist problem."



The issue of otherness in country is further highlighted in the case of Lil Nas X, who came out as gay following the success of his 2019 hit, “Old Town Road.” After he was nominated for a Country Music Association Award (for musical event of the year), a flood of national headlines erroneously declared him the first openly gay person to snag such an honor. In the past decade, openly gay artists Shane McAnally and Brandy Clark have been recognized by the CMAs. The media’s lazy assumption speaks to the view of country as a “hillbilly” home where there can’t possibly be space for queer folks, resulting in erasure by accident. Country’s gay community hasn’t always been heard, but it is rich, and critics often confuse the Music Row machine and country radio — where queer voices are indeed silenced — with the music makers themselves.

As the world considers more interpretations of sexuality and gender, and country music becomes a global commodity that needs to react to those trends, there’s space in the expanding universe for a star like Peck. “Whether they even recognize the reasoning, I think a lot of gay people feel detached from country music,” he says. “But marginalized people of any kind have to bushwhack and blaze our own trails a lot of the time. Those paths aren’t there for us, and it’s usually in the face of a lot of adversity or a lot of judgment.”

It’s a complicated balance to recognize the role queer people have played in country music and also acknowledge how they’ve been curbed. Peck knows this history well, from Lavender Country, the band credited with releasing the first gay country album in 1973 (Peck has sung with them), to Willie Nelson’s 2006 version of the cowboy-lovin’ anthem “Cowboys Are Frequently, Secretly Fond of Each Other” (Peck has covered it). His mask is reminiscent of Jimmy “Orion” Ellis, a 1970s and 1980s country singer with Presleyan vocals and an affinity for obscuring his face. Peck’s masks are more SM than bedazzling like Ellis’s, but a mask nonetheless signifies a love of showmanship.

“My introduction to country music was Dolly Parton when I was a kid, and I didn’t know she was a real person,” Peck

says “I thought she was like Elvira or something, because she was this larger-than-life character. That’s the country music I love. People always think I’m playing a character, but that’s not it at all. It’s about a super-heightened version of yourself to tell the story better, which is what Dolly does. She wears wigs — she’s a drag queen, basically — but she sings these sincere, heartbreaking songs, and it’s all very genuine. That’s kind of what I try to do.”

Although Peck maintains his mysterious persona, he hasn’t made up a past that doesn’t exist. He’s an entertainer, not a myth. Peck grew up all over, with a father who was a sound engineer for glamrock bands including Suzi Quatro and a mother who valued creativity; he has two brothers. A trained ballet dancer and singer obsessed with David Bowie and cowboys, Peck had started performing by the age of 10. He taught himself to play guitar, performed in punk bands and studied the art of mask-making before recording *Pony* on Gabriola Island in British Columbia.

“I think most people want to discount me as a hipster who’s dipping my toe into this yee-haw agenda,” Peck says. “But the reality is, this has been me for a long time. This has been a dream of mine my whole life.”

His country dream is coming to fruition at a time when change is increasingly unavoidable, at least in terms of integrating queer voices and supporting LGBTQ people. Miranda Lambert dedicated her song “All Kinds of Kinds” to WorldPride 2019, which she attended in New York City; Carrie Underwood’s “Love Wins” hints apolitically at equality; and Maren Morris is a fierce and outspoken advocate, as are Musgraves and Margo Price. Nashville is also evolving: Its music community rallied fast and hard when former Arkansas governor and vocal homophobe Mike Huckabee joined the CMA Foundation’s board in 2018. He resigned in less than 24 hours.

Newer artists like Brandon Stansell are leaning in to mainstream careers as queer people, following in the path of Ty Herndon and Chely Wright, who both came out years after their debuts but whose careers never benefited from their truths. On the indie end, acts such as Karen & the Sorrows, Trixie Mattel and Little Bandit are breaching the genre to make it more inclusive. Brandi Carlile, a queer artist and 2019 Grammy nominee for album of the year, is doubling down on her commitment to the genre, producing country records, singing duets with Dierks Bentley and forming the female supergroup the Highwomen.

“She’s really changing the narrative,” says Peck, who sees a link between how country music has historically sidelined women and how it currently treats the queer community. “I feel like the problem is less about homophobia. It’s a chauvinist problem,” he says. “Female musicians go through this all the time. The gatekeepers of country, as is the way with everything on this planet, tend to be conservative, straight white men. I think that’s kind of ending. I really do believe it.”

Peck has dreams too: of performing at the CMA Awards, singing at Nelson’s ranch and, of course, appearing at the Grand Ole Opry. He thinks they’ll all come true, because despite the mask, he has never been less hidden in his life.

“I genuinely feel like I’m on a horse riding into the sunset, on my own terms,” he says before disappearing into the hotel room with his bed of masks. There’s a cowboy battle raging in Nashville, and Peck has been practicing with his whip. ■



sterling for all

PHOTOGRAPHY BY AARON FEAVER



The trajectory of
Sterling K. Brown
has us on the
edge of our seat,
which is right
where he wants us

BY ANITA LITTLE

The first time I meet Sterling K. Brown the smoke is literally clearing around him. Yes, a crew member has just turned off a hazer as production pauses for Brown to swap into another look, but the metaphor is undeniable. The actor, despite almost two decades of well-regarded work on television, has only recently become a household name, thanks to his Emmy-winning performance across four seasons of NBC's *This Is Us*. Unlike Randall Pearson — the straitlaced, civically engaged and mathematician-smart patriarch he plays on the show — Brown has natural swag and commands the room with a rich, resonant voice trained at Stanford and in regional theater nationwide. Decked out in a visual tribute to casual cool — rolled-up trousers, a gold medallion and a half-buttoned graphic-print shirt — he asks, “Can we get some more Drizzy?” He shifts from posing to dancing as Drake’s “Controlla” fills the studio.

When I ask Brown how success and pop-culture notoriety have changed him, he responds quickly.

“I’m a total dick now,” he tells me. “I have narrowed my peripheral vision.”

Some might say this means he’s more goal-oriented. Others might add that it feels like a moment of profound clarity.

In 2018 Brown launched Indian Meadows Productions, which gave him the power not just to change the narrative but to create it. The production company’s namesake is the St. Louis neighborhood where Brown grew up. His mom still owns a house there, and his brothers and sisters are among the city’s residents. The mission of Indian Meadows Productions is to champion racial inclusion in Hollywood, both in front of the cameras and behind them. Brown has already closed a deal with Hulu for his company to produce an adaptation of Esi Edugyan’s bestselling book *Washington Black*.

“I wanted to have some sort of control over what stories could be put out to the world and take advantage of an opportunity to be one of the storytellers,” Brown says. “If you don’t have enough bells and whistles in terms of the right writers, the right showrunners, the right directors, the best piece of material can fall on deaf ears.”

By owning the means of production, so to speak, Brown will also be able to reshape one of the most formidable barriers for black-led media: marketing. Oftentimes, films and TV programs featuring predominantly black casts are promoted only to black

audiences, which can drastically reduce a project’s impact. (The packaging of works by Tyler Perry, who made history in October as the first black person to independently own a studio lot, comes to mind.) Recent films such as Jordan Peele’s *Us* and Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* — in which Brown plays father to Michael B. Jordan’s Killmonger — have benefited from crossover appeal, both critically and at the box office, but they remain the exception. Nevertheless, the tide is shifting. The 2019 study “Inclusion in the Director’s Chair,” by the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, features an “intersectional analysis” of 1,335 directors attached to top-grossing films between 2007 and 2018. The study determined that “16 of the directors of the top 100 movies [in 2018] were black — this historically high figure is nearly three times greater than the six black directors working in 2017 and twice as many as the eight black directors working in 2007.”

Says Brown, “If you have a black movie, we need to stop selling it as if it’s only for a black audience. A movie about black people can appeal to anyone. All human stories have a universal appeal when told well.” One practice he has come up against in Hollywood is the casting of leading men of color opposite non-black actresses in an attempt to end-run the marketing of a film as a “black movie.” Saying he “frowns upon” black actors who have typically worked opposite white or Latina leading ladies, Brown is careful when choosing projects.

“Will Smith has the strength to pair himself with whomever he wants and sell that movie globally,” he says. “He can provide an opportunity to a sister to shine in a way they may not be able to if it weren’t a Will Smith movie.”

When projects with black casts reach







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A movie about black people can appeal to anyone. All human stories have a universal appeal when told well.”



a broader audience, that of course results in more big breaks for black actors, directors and writers. Brown's success is proof: His command on the mainstream *This Is Us* and the Ryan Murphy-produced *American Crime Story*, both of which feature relatively diverse casts, led to a lot of televised acceptance speeches. In addition to his two Emmy wins, he is the first African American to win a Golden Globe for best actor on a television drama and the first African American male actor to win a Screen Actors Guild Award for a drama series. Outside of *This Is Us* and *Indian Meadows*, Brown added A24's November release *Waves* to his film résumé, nabbed a part in Disney's colossal *Frozen* sequel and will appear on the next season of Amazon Prime's flagship comedy *The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*.

I ask Brown if, as a leader in an industry that suffers from a scarcity of opportunities for actors of color, he feels pressure to embody the punishing standard of #BlackExcellence. He tents his fingers, leans back and ventures a joke. "We got to keep it together, because they got Mekhi Phifer or Omar Epps on call, waiting to come in and replace your boy," he says. "You spend so long feeling replaceable that it's hard to shake that feeling."

His television fame is concurrent with something else, something he's learned to be unabashed about but never expected: his emergence as a sex symbol. Randall Pearson wasn't scripted to be sexy, but thirst isn't predictable. On Google "Sterling K. Brown shirtless" returns more than 1 million results. Some of the most over-the-top headlines include sterling k. brown's sexy abs shatter instagram and give the people sterling k. brown's booty!

"Sneaky fit" is the term Brown uses to describe his physique. "I'm not popping out of my clothes per se, but if I ever take my shirt off, you'd be like, Oh snap, I didn't see that one coming." He quickly adds, "I don't think I've ever gotten a job because of the way I was built. People have seen me as being a good actor, and they hire me for things in which they need a good actor."

The hypersexuality assigned to black men has some grisly historical underpinnings that are glazed over in horny internet chatter — "It's a slippery slope, and it's one that is dangerous," he says — but Brown recognizes that "it's nice to have your sexuality celebrated, as long as you're being celebrated in total, as a whole human being and not fetishized as one particular thing."

In other words, "sex symbol" is not a terrible title when it's your least impressive achievement. After years of laying the groundwork, Brown seems to have found the freedom to transcend being one thing and to embrace many personas: the total dick, the leading man, the producer, the trailblazer, even the sex symbol. No wonder audiences are mesmerized. ■





INTELLIGENT
& AMBITIOUS

Sarah *Paige*



Photography by **Rocky Batchelor**







We're happy to have you feature on Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started? Thank you for having me feature! I wouldn't really consider myself a model, as this is my first professional shoot. So maybe this is where it all starts... so I guess thank you Playboy for giving me an amazing platform to start this journey.

Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime? It's just about creating a great work life balance. When I know I've done my work, my phone goes on silent, and I try to relax. I always schedule in some time in the week to enjoy my hobbies, this year I started aerial acrobatics, which is something I had never tried and now I love! Also, I try to have a holiday planned, it makes working a lot easier, you have something to look forward to!

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? I think any woman who is appreciated for their looks also wants people to be able to see beyond that. See the potential in their talents, their intellect and in their abilities.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? Everyone should be able to express their individuality, their sexuality and their uniqueness. If we all conformed to an image that society deemed acceptable, how boring would life be? Diversity is what makes it interesting.

3 things that you can't go a day without. Coffee, cuddles and naps!

What about those crazy DMs you must receive! Care to share a few funny stories regarding those? Now that I'm telling you this, I'll regrettably draw attention to it. But I've randomly gotten quite a few foot-fetish DM's. Requesting foot pics. I never send any of course, but I always think they're really funny!

Now we're sure you experience a lot of male attention on and offline, any advice you would like to give to men out there who are hoping to catch your eye the right way? I love a good sense of humour, when men take a genuine interest in my life and are consistent. I love when I get a message to just check in and see how my day is going. Men who are confident and hardworking catch my eye.

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? When someone doesn't let you know where you stand. Too many people love to play games when dating. I find this a waste of time and a big turn off.

That said, what advice would you have to give to all women out there when it comes to love and relationships. Find someone who is your best friend and your partner. If it's not that, it's not worth it. There are so many great people out there just waiting to treat you like a queen. It's not the end of the world when something doesn't work out. It just means there's a better fit out there for you.

Thank you so much for sitting down with us and letting us get to know you! Any last words for our readers out there? 2022 has been such an amazing year for me and to end the year with Playboy just tops it off! Thank you.











UŽUPIS UTOPIA

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MAX LOEFFLER



What's the true story behind a make-believe republic in Eastern Europe that captures the imagination of everyone who visits? **Daisy Alioto** searches for meaning in a booming micronation

Before traveling to Užupis, a self-declared republic within the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius, I read the 2009 novel *The Republic of Užupis*, by Korean author Hailji. The protagonist, Hal, hopes to return to Užupis to lay to rest his father's ashes. Upon arriving, he encounters confusion about the republic's location, first with customs agents at the airport and then with his taxi driver, who circles Vilnius for more than an hour searching for the neighborhood. This is pure magical realism, but the allegory makes its point: Užupis, a micronation founded in 1998, is elusive to outsiders but meaningful to those who want to believe.

Arriving via Stockholm, I begin my journey differently than Hal. I bypass customs at Vilnius Airport and head straight into a cab. The driver easily pulls up my Užupian Airbnb on GPS. We wind through the narrow turns of Vilnius's Old Town, and Billie Eilish's familiar vocal fry on "Bad Guy" growls from the speakers as we cross the Bridge of Užupis. *Užupis* means "beyond the river," and the republic's parliament is housed in a watering hole that overlooks the moat-like border. In an alcove in the stone embankment sits a bronze mermaid statue that's famous among locals; it was created by Romas Vilčiauskas, an unremarkable sculptor by Google standards. Legend has it that if you look into the mermaid's eyes too long, you'll never leave.

Visiting a new city just as the leaves start to turn is one of travel's many charms. Visiting a micronation on the precipice of autumn belongs in a separate category. Here, the air

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**My intention
was to pack
all the world
into one
little place.”**

shivers with the past and a promise for the future of humanity. The Užupian constitution, 41 articles in length, is posted on mirrored plaques for public consumption and is considered required reading for tourists. Rūta Ostrovskaja, the republic's Ambassador in Vigor and Decision Making, calls the document “one of the best human rights declarations in the world.” Articles range from “Everyone has the right to love” to “Everyone has the right to cry.” Some border on the absurd. (“A cat is not obliged to love its owner but must help in time of need.”) Notably, in December 2018, the version of the constitution at the Embassy of the Republic of Užupis to Munich — the document has been translated into dozens of languages — became the first ever to recognize artificial intelligence: “Any artificial intelligence has the right to believe in a good will of humanity.” (Said embassy consists of a small collective of artists and techies based in the Bavarian capital.) According to Ostrovskaja, the constitution wasn't written to be zany. It was written in the interest of survival.

Užupis was founded on April Fools' Day 1998 and has since captured the attention of artists, poets and the technologically forward alike. It raises questions about the dwindling possibilities for borderless states in a post-digital world and the potential for creative autonomy and self-governance amid rampant globalism. Comprising 148 acres and cordoned off from the rest of the capital by the Vilnia River, it has roughly 7,000 inhabitants. MicroFreedom, a website that indexes the world's micronations, ranks Užupis as “distinguished” for its longevity and success. It has been likened to Christiania, Copenhagen's hippie commune, minus the open-air cannabis market. Munich's ambassador to Užupis, Max Haarich, has even suggested that it's the most stable republic in Europe. Yet the ephemeral nature of a micronation invites projection and change: Depending on whom you ask, Užupis is either a revolutionary political project or a fairy tale; it's a figment of the Baltic imagination or another rapidly gentrifying former Bohemia. In truth, Užupis is all these things.

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The Office of the Geographer and Global Issues, a division of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research within the U.S. State Department, owns a collection of letters that have been referred

to internally as the Ephemeral States file. The collection paints the micronation movement as a study in contrasts. One letter is from Leicester Hemingway, brother of Ernest, and comes with an endorsement from an employee of the Inspector General's Office that reads, in part, “She knows Mr. Hemingway quite well and says he is not a kook and that he is quite serious about this cause.” The endorsement pertains to Hemingway's 1973 request that the United States recognize an artificially created island near the Bahamas. The request was denied. Another letter, from an indigenous leader, sought permission to establish the Maori Kingdom of Tetiti Islands in the South Pacific. Nothing came of it.

Most of the file's contents are comical and a testament to the male desire to conquer even a thimble's worth of territory. But some letters, such as the one from the Maori Kingdom, are harder to dismiss. In a region littered with colonial holdovers, who's to say who owns what?

The internet has no doubt accelerated interest in micronations. It has also divorced the movement from physical territories, though the existence of areas such as Užupis, which the Dalai Lama visited in June 2001, continues to lend credence to land projects. Travis McHenry, who manages MicroFreedom, tells me that the late-1990s rise of GeoCities, which stored usercreated web pages, was instrumental in bringing awareness to individual micronations and the movement as a whole. In 2001, he used GeoCities to build a web presence for his own micronation, Westarctica, which corresponds to 620,000 square miles of unclaimed territory in Antarctica. McHenry, who was in the Navy at the time, staked his claim online for fun. He says the project backfired when two men from the Pentagon came to interrogate him and threatened to revoke his security clearance. Tensions were high in 2001, so McHenry recused himself from his “throne” until his military service ended. He has since transitioned Westarctica into an environmental nonprofit that advocates for the preservation of the region.

The Seasteading Institute, founded by libertarians in 2008, sits on a similar axis of good intentions and make-believe. Its mission is to build autonomous floating cities to counter global ills such as rising sea levels, overpopulation and poor governance, but tax evasion would no doubt be a primary draw for the wealthy wishing to establish residence on a seafaring city. The institute's ambassador program represents 29 countries and 24 U.S. states, as well as Washington, D.C. Venture capitalist Peter Thiel has already invested in the project.

Elsewhere are subreddits, Facebook groups and at least one Discord chat devoted to the micronation movement and populated by younger generations. Of the increasing interest among young people in establishing their own sovereignty, McHenry points out that it solves two perennial gripes of adolescence: a “lack of control and having no friends.” It's also a creative exercise, offering opportunities to design currency, flags and stamps. Some of these useless stamps, termed Cinderellas, become collectors' items, according to MicroFreedom founder Steven Scharff. “Not because of the fantasy element,” he says. “The running joke is that the issuing party is gone at midnight.”

...

On my first night in Užupis, I manage to avert my eyes from the mermaid and instead focus on the Bridge of Užupis as I wait in parliament for the foreign minister, Tomas Čepaitis. I watch a man wade into the river to fasten a wooden swing to the wrought iron railing, a cigarette dangling from his mouth. Known as Destiny's Swing, the attraction is a permanent fixture; the laborer is replacing its broken predecessor. Above the

swing are doily-like dream catchers made by local grandmothers. “They’re going to dissolve in the winter, like our memories of our women,” Ostrovskaja later tells me.

Čepaitis and Romas Lileikis, Užupis’s president, founded the republic and wrote its constitution in an attempt to reshape the area’s history. Before World War II, Užupis was a Jewish neighborhood, but about 95 percent of Lithuania’s Jewish population was killed in the Holocaust. The emptied area deteriorated and criminals terrorized anyone unfortunate enough to walk the neighborhood after sunset. The area’s main thoroughfare soon earned the nickname “the Street of Death.”

Čepaitis was familiar with the works of midcentury Polish writer and futurist Stanisław Lem, who predicted such technologies as virtual reality and search engines. Now that those innovations are no longer science fiction, Čepaitis is less interested in them. Amid the technological developments of the past two decades, Čepaitis tells me, “the soul remained the same — or became more savage.” He adds, “You cannot live in a fairy tale all the time; you cannot live in reality all the time. My intention was to pack all the world into one little place.”

Declaring independence has been a test, in some form, of Lithuania’s post-Soviet government. Would the area tolerate a new doctrine? The material conditions of Užupis have certainly improved since 1998 — almost too much. For more than two decades the area has prospered under the utopian constitution. In 2004, geographers Harald Standl and Dovilė Krupickaitė published a study of gentrification in Vilnius with a special focus on Užupis. They found that between 1998 and 2003, real estate prices in the area rose by more than 70 percent. They also found that 65 percent of the heads of “new households” in Užupis had a university degree, versus 12 percent of “old households.”

Užupis is now one of the most expensive places to live in Vilnius. Electric scooters zip by a sculpture of an angel in the republic’s central square. Herr Katt, a hip barbershop, and Kitsch, a gallery-café, cater to a new generation. Kitsch accepts Bitcoin. It also serves an Užburger on a blue bun in homage to the republic’s flag, which features a hand encircled in blue. Čepaitis tells me these changes are not unwelcome as long as the atmosphere is preserved, but he also claims that historic wooden buildings have conveniently gone up in flames to make way for development. In this way, Užupis is no different from every gentrifying community in the 21st century.

In 2013, Gleb Divov, a Moscow native, was planning a move to Barcelona. He was set to open a company there and had even learned Spanish. On a whim, he booked a three-day trip to Vilnius and ventured into Užupis on the last. “When I walked across the bridge, it just clicked: Okay, I’m home,” he says. Divov subsequently moved to the area, where he founded a start-up, Musical Blockchain, that aims to bring residents together with compositions created by artificial intelligence.

Divov is a synesthete: He can hear a melody just by looking at an object. His AI composer uses more than 40 data points — from color to shape to environmental conditions — along with a coded knowledge of music to turn areas of Vilnius into a symphony. “We define musical composition as a chain of linked blocks,” he explains. Now Užupis’s Minister of Sound, Events and Technologies, Divov dreams of implementing this tool as a means of canceling out noise pollution and drawing attention and new visitors to underdeveloped parts of the city.

The city wasn’t always tourist-friendly, according to William Adan Pahl, a Detroit native who has lived in Lithuania since the year of Užupis’s founding. But Užupis, by welcoming

newcomers with open arms, benefited from a wave of tourism that flooded Eastern Europe following the Pan-European expansion of Ryanair airlines and Lithuania’s new popularity as a destination for bachelor parties. (“The cities of Eastern Europe may come to curse the day they ever got that Ryanair route,” reported *The Independent* in 2016. “Yes, invading hordes of drunken Brits is good for the local economy, but at what greater cost?”)

“It was like something was coming from off in the distance and we were going to be ready for that change when it came,” Pahl says. He stops short of calling the government a drinking club and considers the constitution a symbol rather than a living political document. “From my point of view, we’re celebrating the instrument of the constitution. It’s the focus of a celebration. It’s not a tool. It reflects the spirit of the place,” Pahl says.

Haarich, the Munich ambassador, wants to use Užupis as a model for bringing together techie and art communities. He worked in artificial intelligence at a start-up center partnered with BMW, among other companies, that has plans to expand into one of Munich’s artist communities. “Artists can make technology more ethical just by bringing it closer to society and making it more accessible,” he says. “There’s this big threat of gentrification — but there’s this big chance to create something very innovative that I want to connect to Užupis because it has 22 years of experience with gentrification.”

Haarich is part of a Facebook group dedicated to micronations. It’s filled with people hoping to found their own Užupis. Few of these communities will survive — but if they do, technology will likely play a role. McHenry says, “They really are an inspiration to every other micronation out there and to common people who have no idea what a micronation is.”

...

As if to underscore the fascination with Užupis’s origins, a Korean production company is filming a re-creation of the annual April 1 celebration of independence during my visit. On that date every year, tourists can get their passports stamped on the bridge, and government ministers are paid for their service in rare Užupian currency. At this mock celebration, a band plays “When the Saints Go Marching In” as actors on stilts walk alongside cars flying the republic’s flag. I approach two locals cast as extras who, like me, are watching the action.

“I’ve never seen a Lithuanian dressed like this,” says a girl costumed in Victorian fashion. Her companion is wearing a parrot suit.

“Is the parrot customary?” I ask.

“No.” We both laugh.

On my last day I revisit the constitution plaques and wait for other tourists to leave before setting my palm on the Open Hand of Užupis, which is mounted nearby. Tourists lay their hands on this symbol for good luck. It shares its design with the official flag: a hand with a hole through the middle. Some sources cite it as a symbol of refusing bribes, but Ostrovskaja tells me it means “easy come, easy go”—as in, one can’t hold on to material things. I touch it and feel an invisible country slip through my fingers.

In his book *Invisible Cities*, the Italian journalist and author Italo Calvino writes, “The catalogue of forms is endless: until every shape has found its city, new cities will continue to be born. When the forms exhaust their variety and come apart, the end of cities begins.” Before I leave, Čepaitis gives me a book of poetry by a Finnish ambassador. When I open it back home in New York City, a stamp falls out. Its provenance: the Federal Republic of Lostisland. ■

HERITAGE SPOTLIGHT



Depth *of* Field

We train
our lens on
the magazine's
founding photo
editor for some
long overdue
exposure

BY CAT AUER

Few jobs are as ready-made to inspire envy among lovers of women than that of PLAYBOY photo director. Yet little has been written about the magazine's founding "picture editor," Vincent T. Tajiri, who for 15 stratospheric years oversaw our photo department. During his tenure Tajiri watched the print run top 7 million, thanks in large part to

the teeming photographer and stringer ecosystem he developed. Praised as a gentleman and a deep thinker by his former employees (and called a cocksucker by Hunter S. Thompson; more on that later), he remained an elusive figure among the many outsize personalities of playboy's early years. So who was Vince Tajiri?

...

Born in southern California in 1919, Tajiri was a teenager when his older brother Larry, who went on to be a distinguished journalist, brought home a 35-mm SLR camera from a reporting trip to Asia. Vince, who'd been priming himself to be a writer, fell in love with the medium. "I knew very little about photography then," he told *Popular Photography* in 1968, "but I shot promiscuously and uninhibitedly." At the same time he was developing his photography skills, he wrote prolifically for English-language papers that served the Japanese American community.

At the age of 18 he moved to San Francisco to work for one such daily, *Nichibei Shinbun*. The previous year he had created Rigmarole, an intermittent *Nichibei* column that variously covered the nisei (Americans who, like Tajiri, were born to immigrant parents from Japan), sports stats, movies and any other topic that caught Tajiri's attention.

In February 1941 Tajiri was drafted into the Army. He was at Camp Bonneville in Washington state on December 7 of that year when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The next day the United States entered World War II, and less than three months later the government ordered nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans living on the West Coast — the vast majority of them U.S.-born citizens — out of their homes and into incarceration camps. Among them were Tajiri's mother and younger siblings, who were sent to the camp in Poston, Arizona with only what they could carry. They lost everything else, including the home they owned in San Diego.

Tajiri was a sergeant in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team — the famed unit composed of nisei soldiers that became the military's most decorated — when he married his girlfriend, Rose Hayashi, in Hattiesburg, Mississippi in August 1943, ahead of his expected deployment. Poor health ultimately kept Tajiri out of overseas duty. Three of his brothers volunteered to serve. One, who joined the Army out of Poston in 1943, was later awarded a Purple Heart.

The inequity between the Tajiris' service and the government's bigotry is almost too obvious to state, but Vince gave it eloquent expression in a September 1942 letter to the *Fresno Bee*: "Except

for minor differences in pigment we are just like you." Not only did the Army have Japanese American officers, he reminded readers, but "another 16,000 are serving in the ranks.... America's battle is our battle, and America's enemies are our enemies."

...

After the war, Vince and Rose moved to Chicago, where they started a family. Vince took on freelance photo assignments and soon enough was working concurrently as editorial director of three photo-based titles: *Guns Magazine*, *Art Photography* and *Figure Quarterly*, the first two of which were titles of Publishers' Development Corp. While at PDC, Tajiri met Hugh Hefner, who worked in the circulation department by day and, later, in his kitchen on his nascent magazine by night. Both *Art Photography* and *Figure Quarterly* featured pinup and nude photography, and it's likely Tajiri's experience with such material helped Hefner see him as an attractive recruit.

In 1956 Tajiri signed on to be playboy's first photo editor, making him Hefner's "third important hire," according to Hefner biographer Steven Watts — presumably after art director Art Paul, who designed the Rabbit Head, and A.C. Spector, a key editor. Shel Silverstein, in his 1964 three-part history of PLAYBOY, wryly imagined Hef's hiring process: "Here's how it will be...Spec is the associate publisher, so he gets \$700 a week... Vic is promotion director, so he gets \$500 a week...John is production manager, so he gets \$400 a week...and Tajiri, you'll be photographing the girls, so you pay us \$100 a week!"

"When I arrived, the photo department was me, one file cabinet, a secretary and two desks," Tajiri once said. A decade later, he was managing a staff of dozens and a countrywide network of stringers. The photo facilities he developed at 919 North Michigan Avenue in Chicago included studio spaces, processing labs, a library and a full kitchen, where film was kept in the freezers. By 1968 the in-house lab was developing about 5,000 rolls of film on-site annually, with thousands more sent elsewhere.

In addition to producing images for the magazine, Tajiri oversaw the photo needs of the clubs, which numbered more than a dozen by 1965, and supervised the photography in VIP, the club magazine. Playboy's many other departments often required original shoots, including for advertising and mail-order products, the Playboy Press and Playboy's modeling agency. Eventually Tajiri was responsible for Playboy's three full-time studios in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

Naturally Tajiri's influence went beyond the images: In 1959, Hefner wanted to run a black-and-white photo taken at a nude-dancing establishment. "There's pubic hair evident in the picture. It's more than a shadow," Tajiri told *Rolling Stone* in 1973. But Hefner didn't want to retouch it, instead printing it very small. Tajiri was nervous about running afoul of obscenity laws — this was four years before the city of Chicago took Hefner to court for publishing photos of a nude Jayne Mansfield — and so, in Tajiri's words, he "shaped up the triangle where it was a little ragged. Made it look like a G-string." Tajiri even created a fake contact sheet. When the FBI came to investigate, they closely inspected the doctored duplicates but found nothing amiss.

His role at the magazine afforded him proximity to celebrities, including Peter Sellers, with whom he played poker at



Opening page: Tajiri and his staff photographers pose in a pajama-Pepsi-pipe tribute to Hefner, circa 1968, taken by Bill Arsenault. Clockwise from Tajiri: Mario Casilli, Pompeo Posar, Alexas Urba, Larry Gordon, J. Barry O'Rourke and Jerry Yulsman. Above: A June 1958 Playbill image of the dapper photo director.



Above: Tajiri and associate picture editor Bev Chamberlain at a 1962 magazine meeting in the original Playboy Mansion in Chicago

Playboy's London casino, and John Cassavetes, who became a good friend, according to Tajiri's daughter, Rea Tajiri, a filmmaker. But not all high-profile interactions were so warm. In 1969 Hunter S. Thompson was working on a PLAYBOY story about French ski champ Jean-Claude Killy and his promotional tour for Chevrolet. Thompson and a member of the Chevy PR team were out drinking in Chicago when Tajiri swung by to ask the flak to bring Killy to the Mansion that evening for a photo shoot. The invite did not extend to Thompson. "The cocksucker told me to get lost," Thompson grouched after the magazine killed his article.

By the early 1970s, Tajiri had begun to doubt the direction the magazine was headed. *Penthouse*, a raunchy imitator, was gaining popularity and pushing PLAYBOY into new territory. Hefner decided to print a photo revealing a peek of Playmate pubic hair in the January 1971 issue.

"I was very, very unhappy about it. I felt we were chasing an upstart," Tajiri later told British writer Russell Miller. Hefner eventually agreed, saying the magazine had temporarily "lost [its] compass," but by then Tajiri had left the company. Back on the West Coast, he contributed technical discussions and commentary sections to books by photographic heavyweights including Annie Leibovitz, Mary Ellen Mark, Will McBride and Bert Stern. In 1977 he wrote a thorough and entertaining biography of silent-screen star Rudolph Valentino for Bantam Books.

Life in Los Angeles helped Tajiri reconnect with his roots. "It was kind of like a homecoming for him," says Rea Tajiri. "He started working more in the Japanese American community." Among other collaborative projects, Vince edited the 1990 publication *Through Innocent Eyes*, a compilation of art, poetry and essays created by children incarcerated at the Poston camp.

Despite running the photography department of a magazine renowned for its imagery, Tajiri's name is not as well known as Hefner's or Paul's. Some of his former employees attribute that relative obscurity to his quiet nature and indifference to the spotlight. His grandson Vince Schleitwiler, a professor of ethnic studies at the University of Washington, sees cultural factors at play.

"The fact that he was kind of invisible but really influential is very much like a lot of other high-achieving Japanese Americans after the war — people who did really significant things in design and architecture, in the sciences and other professional fields," says Schleitwiler. "But they were not inclined to call attention to themselves, having experienced what having attention called to you was like."

Granddaughter Midori Tajiri, who lived in the Tajiri family house in L.A. in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is today a New Orleans artist, remembers how supportive Vince was of family and community. "He loved watching *In Living Color* because there was a Japanese hip-hop dancer. Every time they would come on, he would point her out," Midori says. "It was a big deal, because Japanese didn't always have a role in media and society when he was growing up."

Of course, it all comes back to the pictures. Tajiri died in 1993, but you can still glimpse his quiet brilliance on thousands of PLAYBOY pages — and in a remark he made to *Popular Photography* in 1968. "The most important thing in a photograph of a woman is her eyes," he said. "If a woman's eyes are not sharp, if they don't say anything, the picture doesn't run in playboy."

In the same interview, he also said, "Without photography, there would be no playboy." To which we might add — without Vince Tajiri, one can only wonder what playboy would have been. ■

Playboy's Rearview

Over 66 years and 761 issues, we've covered plenty of ground. From marijuana policy to Mideast mediation to feminist porn, here are a handful of contributions worth a second look

1960s

Frequent PLAYBOY contributor Alex Haley (below) phoned George Lincoln Rockwell, leader of the American Nazi Party, and asked him to sit for the April 1966 *Playboy* interview. "After assuring himself that I wasn't Jewish, he guardedly agreed," Haley reported. "I didn't tell him I was a Negro." Upon Haley's arrival to the interview in Arlington, Virginia, Rockwell produced a pearl-handled revolver, displaying it on the arm of his chair. He needed it for protection from assassins, he insisted. Haley tolerated Rockwell's hostility with backbone and humor ("I've been called 'nigger' many times, Commander, but this is the first time I'm being paid for it," Haley said) to get his story—a fascinating and nearly 12,000-word conversation. Haley went on to pen the groundbreaking book *Roots* in 1976. Rockwell, it turns out, did need protection—an American Nazi shot him to death in 1967.



1990s



Porn and feminism are not mutually exclusive, argued Nadine Strossen in the February 1995 *Forum*. Strossen (left)—the youngest president and first female leader of the American Civil Liberties Union and author of *Defending Pornography*—discussed censorship, sexuality and more with assistant editor Dorothy Atcheson. "If my so-called equality doesn't include freedom of expression, how am I equal?" Strossen asked. "And, if freedom of expression doesn't include the right to talk about sex, to look at pornography, to pose for it, to perform in it, to defend it, how do I have free speech?" Strossen, who led the ACLU for 17 years, is now a New York Law School professor; her work paved the way for today's sex-positive feminists.

1950s



History unfolded in the March 1956 PLAYBOY with the three-page photo of nightie-clad Marian Stafford—the magazine's first *Literary Centerfold*. Although Stafford captivates as a Playmate (below left), the talent behind the lens is equally notable. Ruth Sondak (left), who had been a World War II photojournalist. After the war Sondak became an agency photographer and later a freelancer, shooting portraits of such luminaries as Winston Churchill and Eleanor Roosevelt, among other assignments, across a decades-long career. Sondak's photos of antiwar protesters swarming the Pentagon in 1967 are perhaps her best known—excluding, of course, her pictorial of Stafford.

1970s

In January 1970, the *Dear Playboy* section was ablaze in reaction to the article that had sparked the PLAYBOY cover line: A MEDICAL AUTHORITY CALLS FOR THE LEGALIZATION OF POT. Dr. Joel Fort had argued just that in *Pot: A Rational Approach*, setting in motion a deluge of letters from across the country. Reader response to the then controversial idea came from medical doctors, the assistant secretary of the Department of Health and even a former U.S. narcotics commissioner. Three members of the U.S. House of Representatives also wrote in—all supporting loosened drug laws. Fifty years later, most states allow some degree of usage, but marijuana remains illegal at the federal level.

DEAR PLAYBOY



2001

Dick Gregory (left) is best known as a comedian—he got his big break at the Chicago Playboy Club in 1961—but he was also a committed activist, often using hunger strikes to draw attention to issues such as tribal rights, police brutality and apartheid. In 1980 he traveled to Iran, where the shah had recently been overthrown and 52 Americans had been captured, to "fast and pray for the safe resolution of the hostage crisis." Gregory, a convert to Islam, got an unexpected introduction to the Ayatollah Khomeini and even met with some of the revolutionaries who were holding the captives, presenting a three-stage plan under which he thought they could be freed. Nothing came of the proposal, but he walked away with an amazing tale he recounted in the December 1980 PLAYBOY feature *Inside Khomeini's Iran* (co-written with reporter Barbara Reynolds).

The Good Witch

With the release of a scorching new book and the return of her hit show, writer **Lindy West** finds herself at a crossroads — what happens when you don't have to be shrill anymore?

BY **ERIC SPITZNAGEL**

Lindy West is sitting in a director's chair so big, she says, it's "almost a hammock" — in a Portland, Oregon warehouse filled with cameras and an inordinate number of crew members with handlebar mustaches. As she glances up at the monitors, watching actors repeat lines she helped write, she reflects on her hypothetical death.

"I was exhausted, but I felt proud of myself," she says of a recent six-mile mountain hike across often treacherous terrain. As she was traversing a high, narrow trail, she crossed paths with three other hikers, all young and fit

"I had this realization that if one of them accidentally bumped me off the trail and I tumbled down this ravine, and if someone caught it on video, people would think it was funny," she says. "It wouldn't be 'Woman Tragically Plummets to Her Death.' It would be 'Look at the Fatty Roll.'"

It's hard to know whether to laugh or nod grimly when West shares stories like this. The 37-year-old writer and producer has made a career of this balancing act, pointing out injustice while also being one of the most uproarious social critics of her generation.

Dressed in a Queen T-shirt knotted at the belly and a form-fitting leopardskin skirt, West exudes fabulousness with just a hint of *I'm not entirely sure about this*. She's also exhausted. They're in the final weeks of

shooting the second season of *Shrill*, a series inspired by her best-selling essay collection of the same name. (The show returns to Hulu in January.) The first season was beloved by both critics and viewers, and the show was promptly renewed. The pressure is on to keep the bar high.

"It feels like a lot more responsibility," she says, keeping an eye on a scene in which Aidy Bryant, the *Saturday Night Live* regular and *Shrill*'s lead, gets into a heated exchange with her fictional boyfriend. "I'm glad I wasn't given this kind of long leash when I was 23. I probably would've made something really bad."

Over the course of the day, West mentions several times that for most of her career it was just her on a couch, wrestling words out of her head in an otherwise empty apartment. Now she's sitting in a crowded soundstage where "there are always a million moving parts and a million things to do. Sometimes it's a last-minute *zhuzhing* of the script, and sometimes it's the props department needing me to sign off on some tiny detail that viewers probably won't even notice."

Shrill the TV show follows Annie Easton, a character loosely based on West. While the similarities between the two are hard to miss — both Easton and West are writers living in the Pacific Northwest who champion fat-positivity and get hounded by trolls, oblivious passersby and many others — the fictional counterpart has a long way to go before she reaches present-day Lindyness.

"She doesn't seem like a character who'd be like, 'Yes, I'm a witch and I'm hunting you,'" West says, referring to her recent book of essays, *The Witches Are*

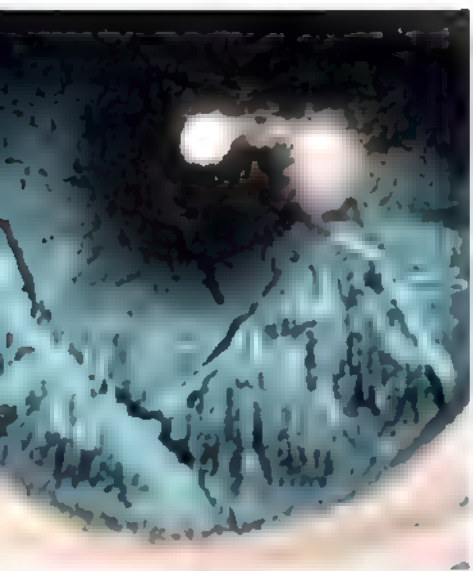


ILLUSTRATION BY **EWELINA DYMEK**



of the
Northwest

Coming. (The title is from her 2017 *New York Times* op-ed about #MeToo blowback and men bemoaning “witch hunts” despite “millenniums of treating women like prey.”) Of the character’s development she adds, “I think we’re going to move in that direction slowly. It’s her journey toward becoming shrill, or learning how to own that.”

West is long past learning how to embrace her inner shrill. She practically owns the word now. She built a career as an outsider critic and satirist of

“ I’LL WATCH A
scene AND BE
LIKE, ‘AW, AIDY IS
THE *prettiest*
LEADING LADY I
EVER SAW.’ ”

misogynist culture, but she’s no longer an outsider; she’s a best-selling author and a writer and executive producer on a hugely successful TV show.

The subtitle for her first book is *Notes From a Loud Woman*. But she doesn’t need to be loud anymore. Everyone is listening.

Which isn’t to say she *shouldn’t* be loud. The rules change, however, when the world has stopped shushing you, when outlets like *The Guardian* and *The New York Times* are lining up to offer you regular columns and Elizabeth Banks wants to produce a TV show with you. Being loud is a weapon of the ignored and disenfranchised (and, of course, of angry mobs with digital pitchforks), not so much somebody who has the spotlight and a captive audience.

“I was so desperate to make people laugh,” West says of her younger self. “I was afraid to be sincere, because it’s vulnerable.”

It makes you wonder what, if anything, she’s scared of now.

...

“You think?”

West wrinkles her nose, not sure if she

wants to take a compliment. We’re in Portland’s Pearl District, on a break from the *Shrill* shoot, and talking about her new book—in particular her essay about the late comedian Joan Rivers that I keep insisting is brilliant. West isn’t so sure.

“I was worried it was dumb,” she says. “I was worried that I was unfairly picking on her.”

I contend that it’s a careful meditation on a woman largely considered a pioneer in comedy. Uncertainty looms over every sentence as West contemplates an icon stuck in a rigged system. “Instead of fighting for us lost, last girls,” she writes, “she turned around and gave worse than she got.”

It’s a far cry from the West of a decade ago. In 2010, when she was a relative unknown writing for the Seattle alt-weekly *The Stranger*, her caustic reviews of movies such as *Sex and the City 2* went viral thanks to snarky but hilarious observations like “What is the lubrication level of Samantha Jones’s 52-yearold vagina?”

West can barely stand to reflect on that early incarnation. “I didn’t know anything,” she says. “I just wanted to be funny. And I was so mean. Some of the stuff that I wrote about people’s work, I would die — I would die if someone wrote that about me.”

She settled into a more confident voice at the self-proclaimed “supposedly feminist website” Jezebel in 2012, where she wrote some of her most challenging and controversial essays on sexism, bigotry and body shaming. She could still be ruthlessly funny, but the stakes were higher, and she was learning how to be more nuanced.

“So much of Lindy’s writing revolves around issues that aren’t black or white,” says Jessica Coen, editor in chief at Jezebel during West’s tenure. “They can’t be distilled down to a single hot take.” Many of the topics she writes about (abortion, fat-phobia) don’t seem like they’d be entertaining, Coen says, but West always pulls it off because “she writes with so much energy and wit, so while the topic itself might not be a delight, reading her always is.”

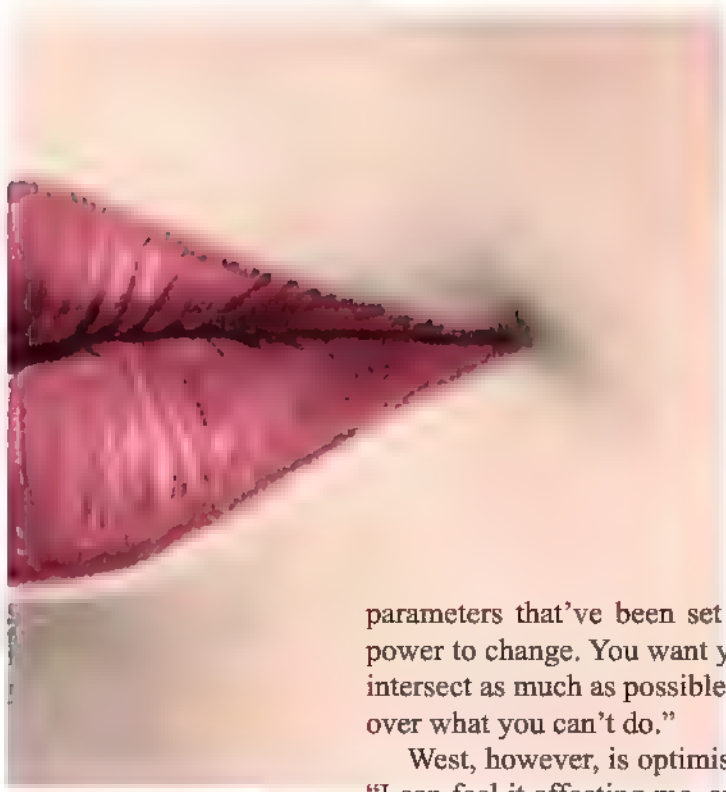
Comedian Patti Harrison, who has a recurring role on *Shrill*, was affected by West long before she joined the cast. She recalls watching West debate the topic of rape jokes with comedian Jim Norton on *Totally Biased* in 2013. West argued that “you don’t get to say that comedy is this sacred, powerful, vital thing that we have to protect because it’s speaking truth to power blah, blah, blah, and then also be like, ‘Well, it’s just a joke — I mean, language doesn’t affect our lives at all, so shut up!’” For Harrison, it had a seismic effect on how she approached comedy.

“I was doing improv in college at the time, and I believed nothing should be off limits,” she says. “But Lindy was so funny and so smart. I wanted to be provocative, and I thought you should be able to say anything, but she shifted my thinking.”

When *Shrill* became a TV show, West was given a chance to shift people’s thinking on a larger scale. She went from commenting on pop culture to being a part of pop culture. But is *Shrill* changing minds en masse? Or is it just a dot on a TV landscape that idealizes tiny bodies and isn’t about to change because of one norm-busting heroine?

Martha Plimpton, who became friends with West long before she co-founded the #ShoutYourAbortion social media campaign in 2015 with fellow Seattleite Amelia Bonow, says she understands the tug-of-war between idealism and making a commercial product.

“You can’t overhaul the whole fucking system by sheer will alone,” she says. “I’m still figuring it out myself. There are



parameters that've been set up that you have absolutely zero power to change. You want your producing and activist sides to intersect as much as possible, but you also can't torture yourself over what you can't do."

West, however, is optimistic that *Shrill* can make an impact. "I can feel it affecting me, and I made it," she says. "I'll watch a scene and be like, 'Aw, Aidy is the prettiest leading lady I ever saw.' I'm not like, 'Who is this fat woman?' Once you start normalizing it in your brain, I think the process happens really fast."

By way of comparison, she recalls a cultural norm whose evolution she witnessed in her early 20s. "The thing that keeps me going, and I don't know why I always return to this when I'm feeling stressed, is the smoking ban," she says. "It seemed unfathomable that you could get people to stop smoking. But then they made a rule, and now it's unfathomable that bars ever allowed smoking. You can create a new normal, and people who are otherwise resistant will get used to it. You forget what life was like before, you know?"

...

West still gets hate mail. Just the other day, she tells me over dinner, she received a message from a man who wrote, "You're stupid and I heard you wrote a stupid book and I hope it tanks."

But long gone are the days when she would get daily death and rape threats. It's no coincidence that she left Twitter in January 2017.

West insists it wasn't the trolls alone that drove her off the platform, but she's glad that dealing with them is no longer a central part of her job description.

"Why are you entitled to engage with me?" she says of the armies of men who insisted on attacking her — usually anonymously — online. "This is the stuff that started to drive me crazy." Every time she hit back at the barrage of toxic masculinity, it felt "bad for my mental health," she says. "I already feel like I have psychological effects from that time of my life when I had to seem impervious to pain. It's not good for you." And, she adds, "it's not good for your brain to be numb to that."

Eventually West let go—not just of Twitter but of the idea that trolls can be reasoned with, or that there's value in proving how much abuse you can endure. Through the Twitter breach, she emerged as a woman who's more focused, more equipped to fuck up the patriarchy. "Hopefully it's a little bit of a rallying

cry," she says of the "witches" title of her new book.

Her next thought reminds me that, earlier that day, we had spoken of the fears that plagued her as an emerging writer.

"There's power in this label that people are putting on you, and we can assume that power," she says. "They're scared of us."

...

West is vague when discussing what's next for her. More books are likely, and she'll stay with *Shrill* for as long as there's an audience. But she has ambitions that are less about the next career move than, say, exploration.

"I've always had the unspoken thought in my head that I can't go to Japan because I'm too fat," she says. "I'd just Godzilla the whole place, knock everything over and break all the chairs. But that's crazy. It's a regular-size country."

She'd also like to try downhill skiing or scuba diving, two things that terrify her. But her real dream —

"Here," she says, pulling out her phone. "I'll show you."

As she scrolls through Instagram, she tells me about her friend Jenny, who has recently taken up horseback riding. "Jenny told me to follow this Instagram page called African Horse Safaris. It's a real service, and you're basically on a horse that's galloping across the savanna."

She hands me her phone and points to a video. A saddle-cam captures a horseback rider chasing a tower of giraffes somewhere in Tanzania.

"Are you kidding me?" she says, laughing. "That's not CGI, that's real!"

Does she actually want to go to Africa and ride horses amid the roaring wildlife? "I don't know. But it's made me wonder: Is there a reason I *couldn't* do it? I'd have to learn how to ride a horse. It'd have to be a big horse. But horses are strong, whatever."

She keeps flipping through photos and videos. "I'm sure it's probably scary. But maybe that's why I need to do it."

In a weird way, it seems like the perfect next adventure for Lindy West. This is a woman whose entire life has been about doing things that are scary and that the rest of the world told her she couldn't or shouldn't be doing. Is there any difference between shouting about your abortion or feeling proud of your body or pushing back against rape humor and riding a horse at top speed across an African savanna?

West smiles, still transfixed by the images of galloping horses on her phone. "I guess we'll find out." ■





Photography by **Spike Irons** | @ygprophoto
PR **RATNIP PRODUCTIONS** | @ratnipproductions









We're happy to have you featured in Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started? I started by submitting photos to an Australian bikini company, Wicked Weasel, about 9 years ago, in fact. The fans there are so supportive, they made my journey to Playboy an exciting experience!

Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime? As an Ironman triathlete and a former pro volleyball player, I must work out to remain sane! I love running and spending time in the gym. I have been a competitive athlete my entire life and I feel so energized after I get after a good workout, and I take that feeling into the rest of my day.

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? I am honored to be seen in that light. So many people think that women are oppressed and objectified by being shown as a sexual object, but I am empowered by my sexuality. My business success has been in creating environments for women to succeed. Yummygirl, is my company and our motto is "Where Girls Come First"

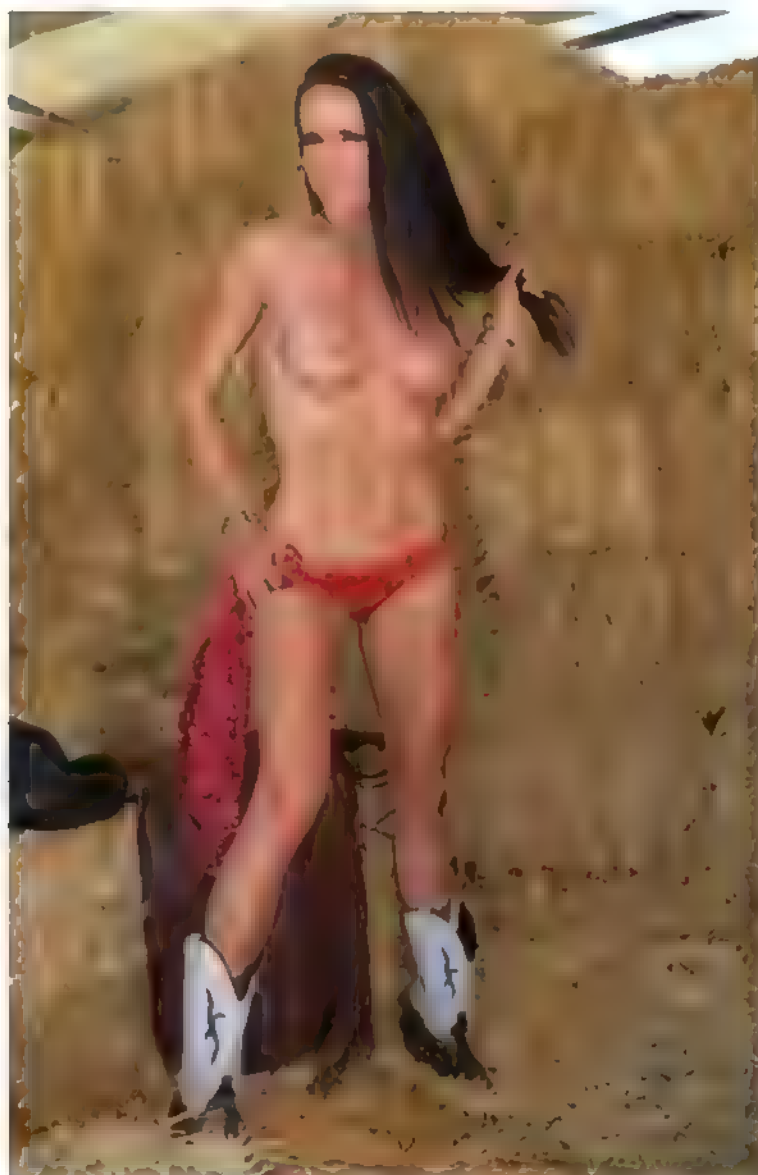
What are some of the biggest misconceptions people have about what you do? People are mistaken when they think that my career is anyone else's choice than my own. To restate, I make my own decisions as to what I do with my body. My husband supports my decisions, but he does not make choices for me. I am blessed to have the strong support of my man, so I can explore my career fully.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? As an American, I am a be-

liever in the freedom of speech that our Constitution provides all citizens. The marketplace is the best arbiter of good and bad speech. I consider the content I create to be "speech", and I am driven to make the best content possible. Government censorship usually picks winners and losers. Let the market pick the speech they want to hear and experience.

We absolutely love your Instagram, your content is very dynamic, inspirational, and downright sexy, could you perhaps tell us what your personal experience as an influencer has been like? I love to interact with my fans and Instagram is a great platform for me. I love experimenting to see what posts create fan engagement and likes. As a businesswoman who depends on the support of her fan base, my fans' desires drive my content creation ideas.

3 things that you can't go a day without. Orgasms (plural), working out, playing catch with my dog.



What about those crazy DMs you must receive! Care to share a few funny stories regarding those? Many men have asked for my hand in marriage. These proposals are super flattering, but usually, they ask in the first or second DM! I love sex with men and women, but my heart will only be given to one person.

Now we're sure you experience a lot of male attention on and offline, any advice you would like to give to men out there who are hoping to catch your eye the right way? So no one believes me but I am very shy in public. I guess the sheltered life I led as a child is still impacting me! So, if you see me and want to talk to me, just come over and say "hi". Once I meet you, I will likely talk your ear off!

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? Being a rude, entitled jerk with bad breath.

That said, what advice would you have to give to all women out there when it comes to love and relationships? Enjoy the feeling of infatuation, but don't lose yourself in that feeling. The "new car smell" of an exciting new relationship will likely fade very quickly once people reveal their true selves. Take it slowly and get to really know the person before you invest your heart into the relationship.

Thank you so much for sitting down with us and letting us get to know you! Any last words for our readers out there? I hope that my fans down under will check out my website for all of my Wicked Weasel bikini photo-sets and my adult videos. It's SofieMarieXXX.com on the Yummygirl.com Network. Please follow me on IG @ [yummysofie](https://www.instagram.com/yummysofie) and Twitter @ [wickedyummy1](https://twitter.com/wickedyummy1).





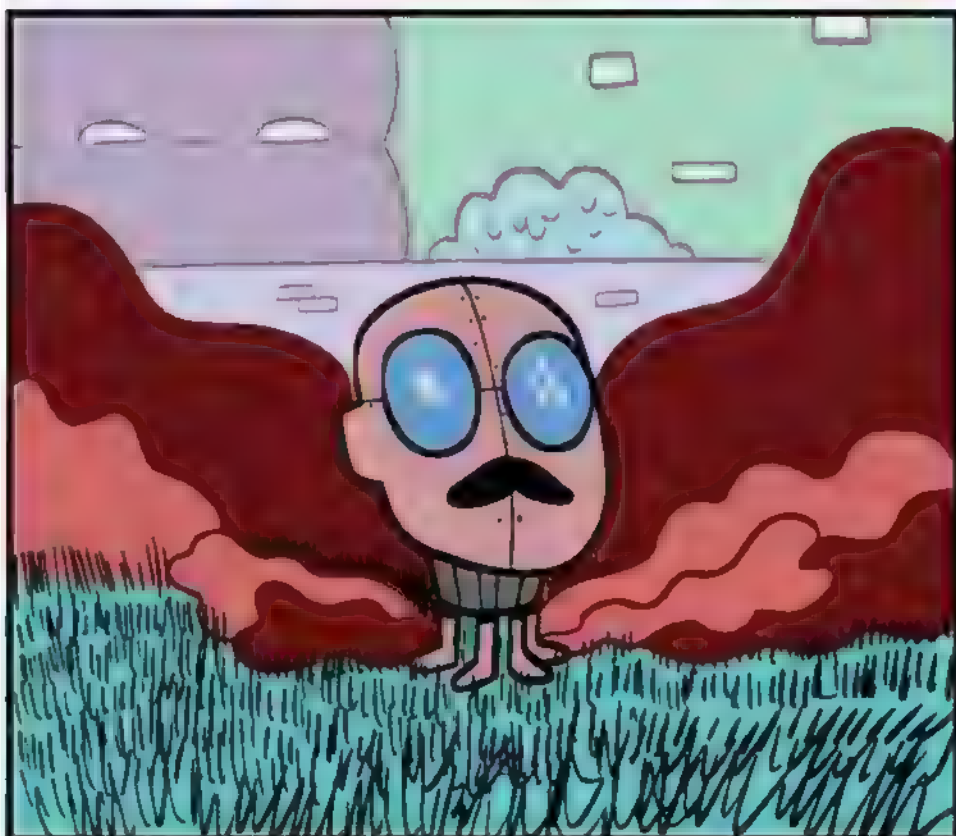
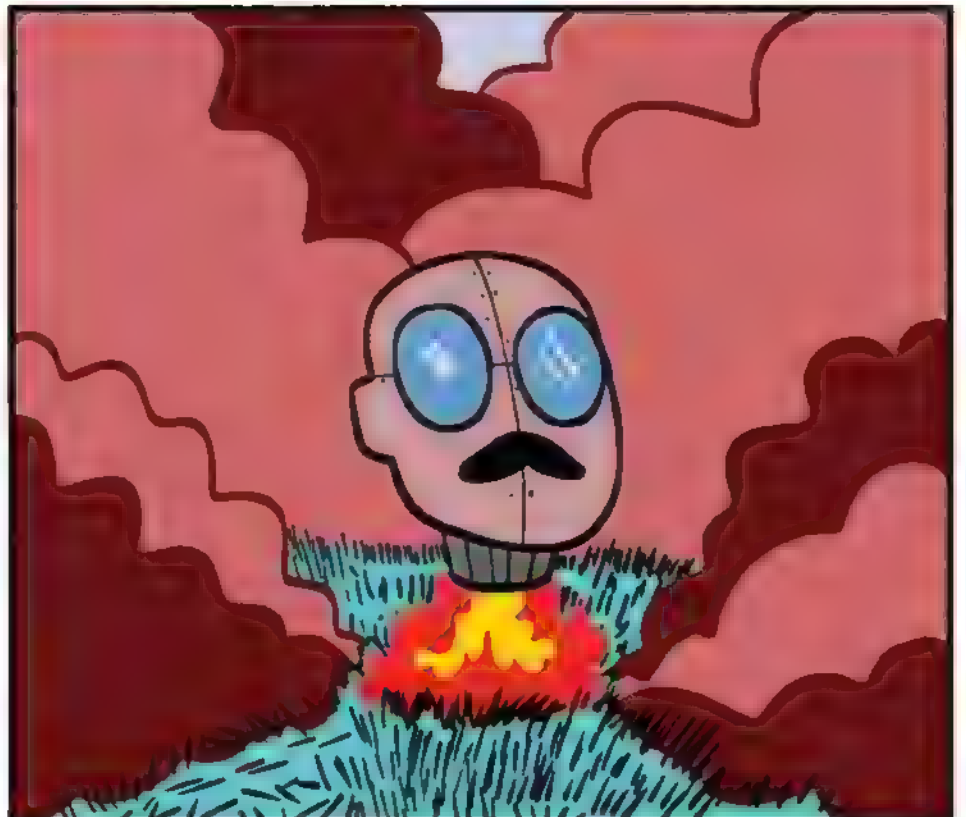
IN THE YEAR 2120, ONE MAN
LOOKED INTO THE FUTURE AND
SAW ONLY DOOM.

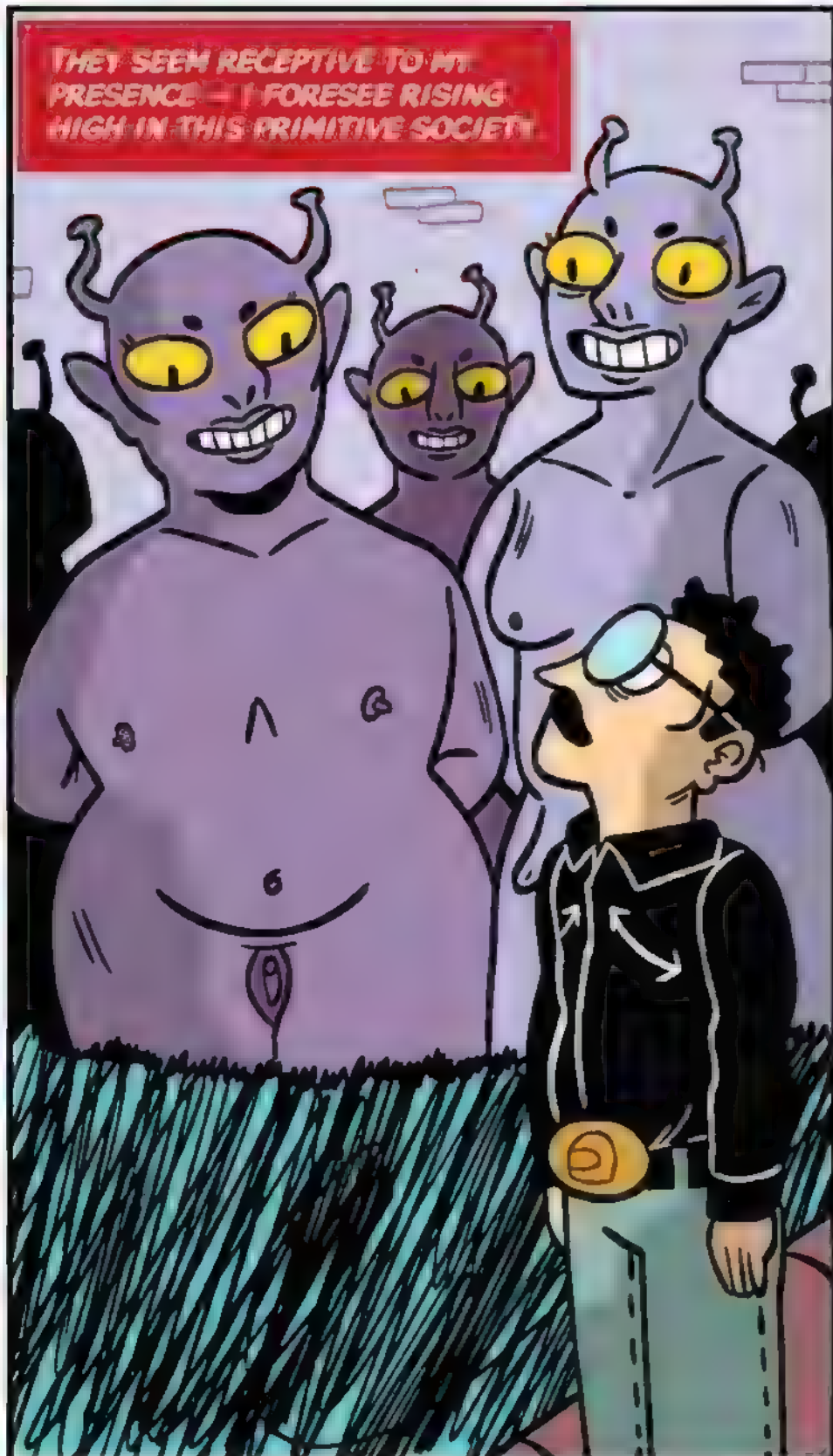
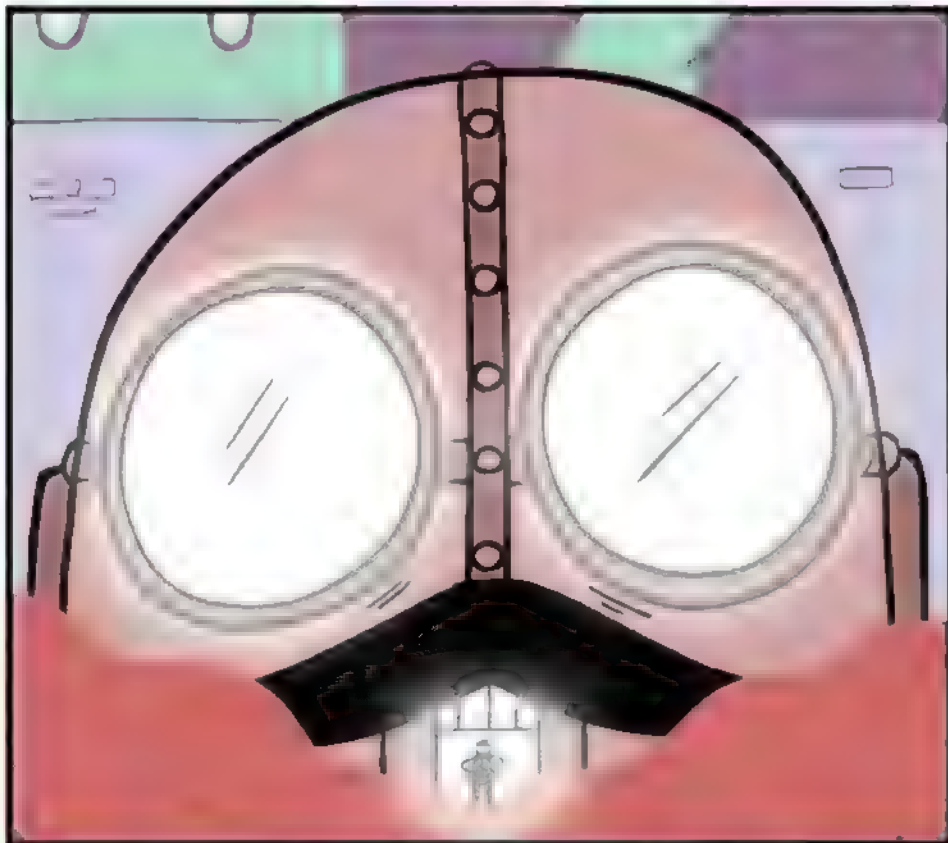
BUT THAT MAN, THE EARTH'S RICHEST,
"SELF-MADE" MULTITRILLIONAIRE
MICAH VEERMAN, HAD A VISION:

LEAVE THE DYING EARTH BEHIND
AND TAKE HUMANITY'S FUTURE INTO
HIS OWN HANDS... AMONG THE STARS.

GAZILLIONAIRE: 7120

by MATT LUBCHANSKY





FEBRUARY 2. I'M BEING SHOWN AROUND SOME SORT OF FESTIVAL. MY CONCERNS ARE MOUNTING

I CAN'T HELP BUT NOTICE: WHAT...GENDER IS EVERYONE?

IT WOULD HELP ME IN THAT REGARD IF YOU ALL WOULD WEAR SOME CLOTHING...



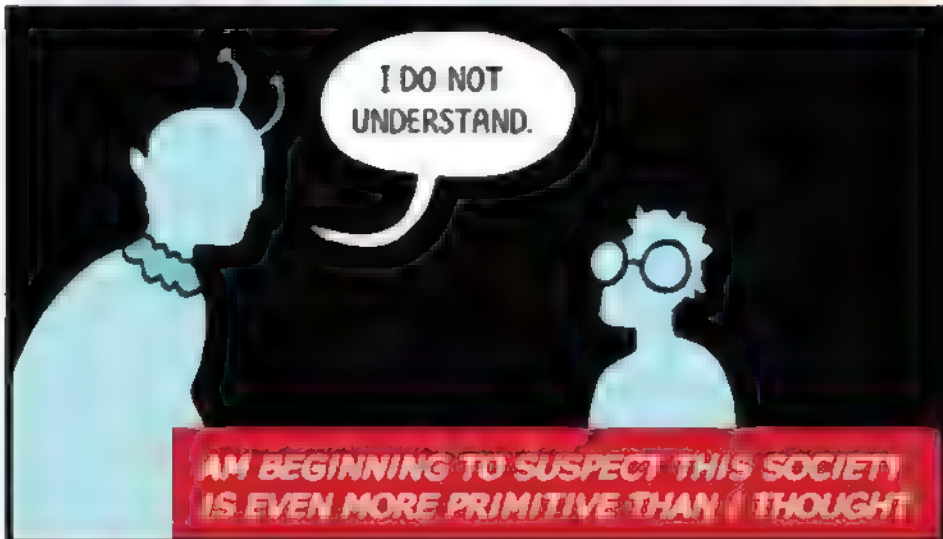
I'M SORRY, MICAHVEERMAN, THAT WORD ISN'T COMING THROUGH OUR TRANSLATORS. JENNDERR?



HMM. AND I'M NOT SEEING ANYONE PAY FOR ANYTHING.



I DO NOT UNDERSTAND.



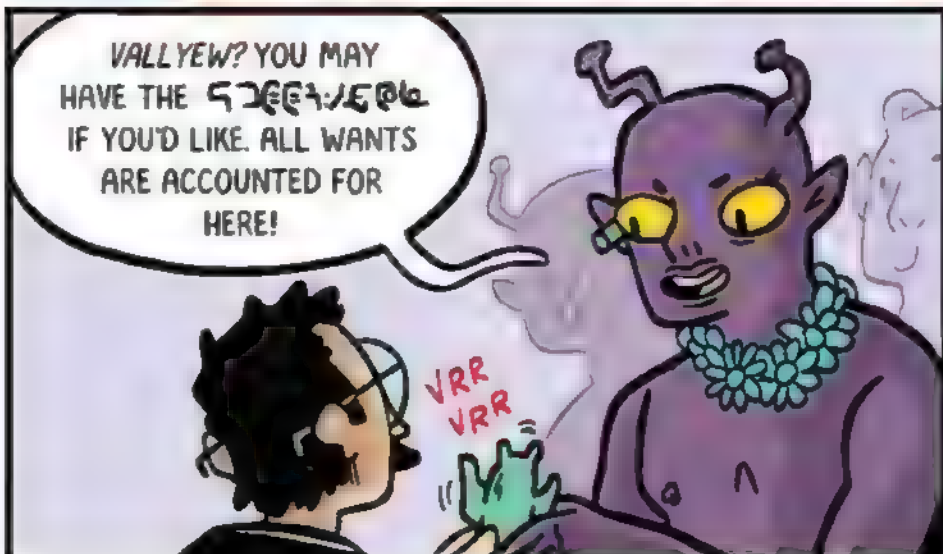
AM BEGINNING TO SUSPECT THIS SOCIETY IS EVEN MORE PRIMITIVE THAN I THOUGHT

WHAT'S THE VALUE OF ONE OF THESE THINGS?



THEY MOST LIKELY NEED MY STRONG HAND

VALLYEW? YOU MAY HAVE THE 5 DEE7/506 IF YOU'D LIKE. ALL WANTS ARE ACCOUNTED FOR HERE!

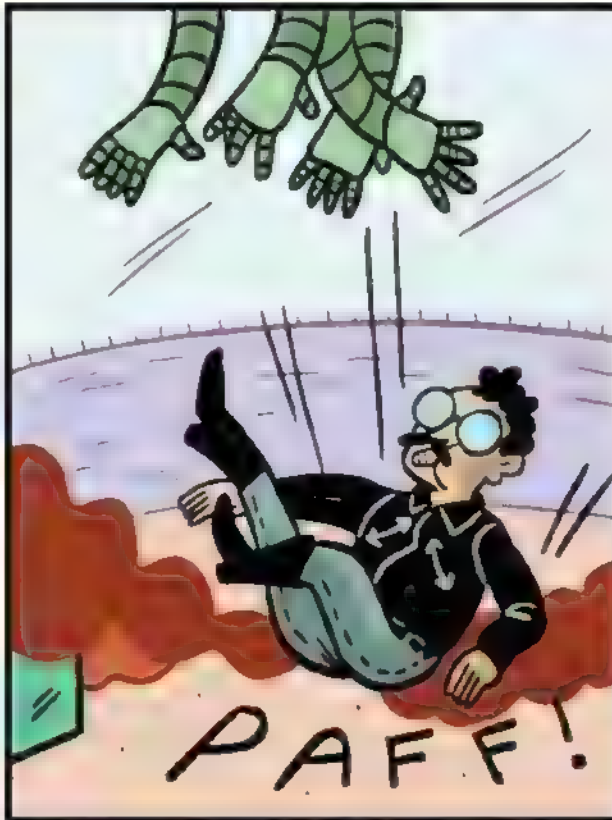


IT'S VERY PLEASURABLE. SEE, MICAHVEERMAN?

FOR MINE IS THE VERY HAND OF THE FREE MARKET



CAPTAIN'S LOG. DATE UNKNOWN.
MY SITUATION HAS CHANGED FOR
WHAT I ASSUME IS THE BETTER!



SO...DO YOU
GUYS THINK
YOU NEED A
PRESIDENT?

CEO...?

END

LUBGHANSKY





Seizure City Seizure City **Seizure City** Seizure City

The hoards of fans who once blotted out the asphalt of the Marathon Clothing store's parking lot are gone. A chain-link fence now surrounds the strip mall that was ground zero for the empire of Nipsey Hussle, the 33-year-old Los Angeles rapper who was murdered here on March 31, 2019. His death came only weeks after he and his business partners had purchased the building for \$2.5 million.

The city of
Los Angeles is
cleaning house
before the 2028
Olympics. Who's
cashing in, and
who's being swept
under the rug?

J. Brian Charles
investigates
L.A.'s latest
transformation

On the surface, the acquisition was the latest in a series of shrewd business decisions by Hussle and his partners, another jewel in the crown for the Grammy-nominated rap star. But this was about more than business. The decision bought him time. For months, city attorney Mike Feuer had been trying to evict the Marathon Clothing store from the strip mall, which cradles the southwest corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue in the heart of South Los Angeles. The city claimed Marathon, the mall's anchor store, was a haven for members of the Crips gang.

Hussle counted himself among the Rollin' 60s Crips, whose territory covers much of the Crenshaw neighborhood. As such, he and his associates never denied the claim that members of the notorious L.A. street gang convened at the store and other adjacent businesses owned by the rapper. It was known that Hussle and his associates employed gang members in an effort to invest in both the neighborhood and its residents. These efforts won Hussle praise from celebrities including Jay-Z and Beyoncé and public officials such as Mayor Eric Garcetti and the Los Angeles Police Department's top ranks.

"He was a tireless advocate for the young people of this city and of this world," Garcetti said in a press conference following the rapper's murder, "to lift them up with the possibility of not being imprisoned by where you come from or past mistakes but the possibility of what comes in the future."

But in July 2019 *The New York Times* revealed the city had been investigating Hussle at the time of his murder. The shocking report speaks not only to contradictions in Hussle's life and death—he was allegedly killed by a man from the same gang—

Designation certain areas as **high-crime** is still an **indictment** of entire neighborhoods.

but also to the powerful forces that have shaped and continue to shape the City of Angels.

California's Interstate 10 once served as a barrier between the affluent and the working class, which is to say between white on one side and black and brown on the other. Today, with the median monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment nearly \$1,400, L.A.'s young white residents are fleeing neighborhoods like West Hollywood, Santa Monica and Westwood and dipping south of the I-10, either in search of more-affordable housing or drawn to the new developments hugging the Metro, the city's quickly expanding light-rail system. At the same time, the city attorney's office has flooded property owners in South L.A. with nuisance-abatement lawsuits. Ninety-eight were filed in Feuer's first four years on the job.

The lawsuits are part of the Citywide Nuisance Abatement Program, which since 1997 has "revitalized" properties with alleged ties to criminal or gang activity. Leveraging the power of court injunctions, the program — enforced by the LAPD, the city attorney's office, the Department of Building and Safety, the Housing Department and the Planning Department — can legally force property owners to abide by new rules ranging from hiring armed security personnel to installing security cameras that face common areas or even individual apartments. Tenants are also subjected to new rules, such as registering their IDs with building security or limiting time in common areas. Violation can lead to eviction.

This is the method of policing the city was exploring in its attempt to evict the Marathon Clothing store from Crenshaw, a neighborhood that appears to be a hotbed of nuisance-abatement lawsuits due to the construction of the new Crenshaw/LAX light-rail line, which plays a central role in the Metro's expansion project. At eight and a half miles, the line will connect Los Angeles International Airport to the recently completed Exposition Line, which runs from downtown L.A. to Santa Monica beach. It's set to open in 2020.

The Marathon store is only a few hundred feet from a planned Metro stop at the intersection of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue. After decades of disinvestment, developers are now pouring billions of dollars into new hotels, luxury apartments and mixed-use developments. As builders hatch plans to reshape

L.A., benefiting from an overcrowded city buckling in a housing crunch, the city's black and brown working-class residents find themselves in the crosshairs.

"They're taking over Crenshaw," says Zerita Jones, co-founder of the branch of the Los Angeles Tenants Union that covers Crenshaw and the adjacent neighborhoods of Baldwin Village and Leimert Park. "They are not coming in to share it with us. They are coming in to take it and move us out."

...

If the smog that notoriously chokes the L.A. skyline isn't too thick, you can squint and see the Hollywood sign from Crenshaw. Just 12 miles separate the corner of Crenshaw Boulevard and Slauson Avenue from the iconic sign, but for decades they were worlds apart. The sign to the north is the beacon of a city whose most noted exports are celebrity, film and television. South of its shadow, in Crenshaw — and to a larger extent South L.A. — sits what was once an industrial hub where black and Latinx laborers churned out cars, tires and tools for the nation's war machine. These worlds have collided as L.A.'s population swells. The city has added more than 1 million residents since 1980 and is now bursting with 4 million people.

It wasn't long after Garcetti won his first mayoral election, in 2013, that he made his ambitions clear: to fix the city's transportation woes. He also wanted the Olympics to return to L.A. He tethered these goals and in 2016 convinced voters to back a half-cent sales-tax hike to fund his transit plans. "We're using the

Olympics as a rallying tool,” Garcetti told *Government Technology* magazine in 2018. “By the time the world comes here, let’s be the best we can. Let’s get rid of homelessness on our streets, let’s build out the infrastructure that we need and accelerate that, and let’s leave behind a legacy: that L.A. became the healthiest city in America when it hosted the greatest sporting event in the world.”

Garcetti named his plan Twenty-Eight by ’28, representing the 28 transit projects that need to open before the Olympic torch is lit in summer 2028. Developers are tracing the blueprints. Where a shopping mall currently sits in South L.A., the city has approved a \$700 million development that includes 961 apartments, a 400-room hotel and retail spaces. Across the street, a developer is looking to build 69 units. Another wants to build 111 more apartments down the street. All these developments are adjacent to planned stops on the Crenshaw/LAX Line. All of them will include affordable housing units—but not nearly enough to prevent displacement.

From the window of Jones’s apartment on Obama Boulevard, she can see change coming. She can see the Exposition Line as it chugs west toward Santa Monica’s beaches; she sees the \$3.25 million investment for a new gymnasium and indoor pool at the Rancho Cienega Sports Complex and developers snatching up mom-and-pop stores every week. She can also see the demographics of her neighborhood changing.

Jones lives in Baldwin Hills’ Chesapeake Apartments, where 105 buildings are spread across 17 acres. The crosscurrents of change landed at Jones’s doorstep in November 2017 when the city attorney’s office filed a nuisance-abatement lawsuit against the Chesapeake, claiming the property posed a threat to the public health and safety of local residents. The ensuing court order set conditions for the owner; if the owner didn’t comply, the city could ask the court to close down the property, ultimately forcing a sale.

“Negligent, callous management has allowed the Chesapeake Apartments to become a hotbed of terror in this neighborhood,”

Feuer said in prepared remarks after filing the lawsuit. “We’ll continue to hold property owners responsible for these harrowing conditions as we take back our communities.”

Specifically, the 2017 lawsuit alleged that the Black P-Stones, a division of the Bloods gang, and an open drug market flourish at the Chesapeake. Residents don’t dispute this. For one, the complex features a road that connects two major thoroughfares in L.A., making it prime real estate for drug dealing and, by extension, violence. To make its case that the Chesapeake is a stronghold of the Black P-Stones, the city sourced evidence on YouTube. Court documents cite a music video filmed at the Chesapeake that features aspiring rappers and alleged gang members flashing hand signs. Another music video includes scenes from a memorial for a man killed by police in a neighboring city; it shows purported Black P-Stones members brandishing handguns.

The argument that the entire complex should be deemed a gang headquarters concerns legal scholars. “The gang allegation was the most racist of the allegations,” says Shayla Myers, an attorney with Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles who helped Chesapeake tenants fight the lawsuit. “The videos are an artistic expression of life in the community. To have that thrown back at them as evidence of gang activity is problematic.”

In its lawsuit, the city demanded the property owner install security cameras trained on residents’ entryways, the footage of which the LAPD could review without a subpoena. The city also tried to establish new “house rules” for residents, demanded that armed security guards take up posts in the complex and suggested that the owner contract a management company to help oversee the property. The injunction filed by the city asked residents to police gang activity and told the property owner to distribute rental agreements that included the new rules. Guests could spend only





limited time in common areas and were required to carry photo IDs, which had to be registered with management. If any of the house rules were violated, the property owner was expected to evict the residents.

“We were the nuisances,” Jones says, “and we were the people who had to be governed and policed.” Jones and her mother, Jessie Smith-Jones, intervened to fight the injunction. They claimed the terms would turn the Chesapeake into a prison. The armed security guards would only add guns to a place already marked by violence. The security cameras criminalized all residents, including the innocent. Residents acknowledged the presence of gangs in the complex, but policing was the LAPD’s responsibility, tenants argued, not theirs.

The city walked back some of the conditions. Today, the security guards in the complex are unarmed and the cameras record only common areas. But residents are still being pushed out. As head of the Chesapeake’s tenant association, Jones is often the first person those facing eviction call. Some fight; some don’t. When they leave, the apartments are renovated and rented at market rate.

...

Mike Feuer rode into the city attorney’s office in the same 2013 election that vaulted Garcetti, a former city councilman, to power. Feuer’s office didn’t respond to requests for comment for this story, but scrolling through its website, you get the impression Feuer wants to align with a new era of progressive prosecutors. His office champions alternatives to imprisonment for teens in street gangs, diversion programs for nonviolent offenders and pop-up legal clinics for the homeless. These programs are part of L.A.’s Community Justice Initiative, or CJI — a name that suggests a softer approach to crime. In

language posted online, CJI is “a neighborhood-focused array of restorative justice, alternative sentencing and diversionary programs.” Nuisance-abatement lawsuits are categorized within CJI as “administrative citation enforcement.”

In his first term, Feuer appeared to have borrowed heavily from two of his predecessors: James K. Hahn, who was city attorney for 16 years before becoming L.A.’s 40th mayor in 2001, and Rocky Delgadillo, who succeeded Hahn as city attorney and served from 2001 to 2009. In 1989 Hahn laid out plans to use the city attorney’s office to tackle L.A.’s gang problem. He wanted to implement the criminological theory known as “broken windows.” A social science term coined in 1982, it gained traction among law enforcement in the 1990s but has since been discredited. The idea is to snuff out minor infractions such as loitering and drinking on the sidewalk with the goal of not just rounding up small-time offenders before they commit major crimes (a theoretical certainty) but signaling to the community that cops won’t tolerate infractions of any kind.

Where Hahn’s tactics differed was his idea to use civil courts via nuisance lawsuits rather than criminal courts as a hammer against crime. The city would move for an injunction to bar alleged gang members from congregating in areas covered by the injunction. This criminalized innocuous gatherings such as family cookouts should two alleged gang members be there.

Those facing civil injunctions have no right to an attorney. Rather than proving cases beyond a reasonable doubt, city attorneys have to prove only that the majority of evidence supports their claims. Once the injunction is in place, those who violate it may later face criminal charges.

Delgadillo’s pursuit of street crime differed in that his office

targeted homes, businesses and properties. Those plans landed heavily on downtown L.A.'s homeless population. Meanwhile, cops got tougher on the streets. William Bratton, another supporter of broken-windows policing, became LAPD police chief in 2002. He launched the Safer Cities Initiative, which flooded downtown L.A. with an additional 50 cops on patrol. This was classic broken windows. Cops handed out 12,000 fines for small offenses in the first year; a 2011 survey by the Los Angeles Community Action Network found that more than half the people living in the Skid Row area had been arrested in the past year.

Upon taking office, Feuer moved forward with an injunction his predecessor had filed against people with alleged gang ties in Echo Park, a gentrified Latinx neighborhood on L.A.'s east side. In June 2013 the city attorney's office filed a permanent injunction against known members of six gangs. But the effort faced blowback from activists and civil rights attorneys. Chief U.S. District Judge Virginia A. Phillips ruled in 2018 that the injunction violated the due process rights of thousands and compelled the city to toss the remaining 1,400 names off the injunction list. (According to the *Los Angeles Times*, almost 9,000 people had faced injunction enforcement since 2000.)

By that time, Feuer's strategy had shifted from targeting alleged gang members to targeting property associated with gang activity. "When we even think about the Citywide Nuisance Abatement Program, it's a lawsuit against the property," says Jamie Garcia, an organizer with the Stop LAPD Spying Coalition. "That's how the city takes its hands off, i.e., 'We are not targeting people.' When you hear LAPD's rhetoric, they go after location-based policing." It's a distinction without a difference, Garcia argues. Targeting land, designating certain areas as highcrime and filing property nuisance suits are still indictments of entire neighborhoods.

The city's practices are buttressed by state law. Shortly after Feuer took office, Governor Jerry Brown signed two laws that expanded the power of cities to evict tenants for certain nuisance violations, including one that allows a city to evict a tenant based on an arrest report, even if the person wasn't convicted. The legislation was backed by the California Apartment Association.

When you couple Feuer's use of civil actions with LAPD's policing tactics, the city has powerful tools to remove people from within its borders. Until April 2019 one such tool was the Los Angeles Strategic Extraction and Restoration program, or LASER, which the LAPD phased out after eight years. LASER focused on identifying and monitoring chronic offenders. To get off the list, a person had to avoid police contact, which is difficult because LASER increases policing in so-called anchor points—locations where several people on the list live, work or socialize. It's the same type of regulation used against the Chesapeake. "It became very clear it was about land and displacement," Garcia says.

Garcia's colleague, Hamid Khan, founder of Stop LAPD Spying Coalition, elaborates: "Such practices are a continuation of policy over time," he says. "Broken windows may be discredited, but it serves as a template for what's happening now."

Fragments of broken windows pop up in other cities too. The department of Justice found that Ferguson, Missouri, where a cop killed teenager Michael Brown in 2014, collected more than \$2.4 million in fines in 2013, largely tied to minor infractions such as parking and housing-code violations. The city issued more than 9,000 arrest warrants for unresolved fines in 2013 alone.

Former South Bend mayor and presidential hopeful Pete Buttigieg, an alumnus of consulting firm McKinsey & Company, has been criticized for his 1,000 Houses in 1,000 Days program, which forced the rehab or demolition of more than 1,000 homes

in the city. The city dispatched code-enforcement officers, and the amount of fines jumped 25 percent, with more than \$500,000 collected in a single year.

The program hit black and Latinx residents hard. Many came to own their homes through inheritance or investing in low-income neighborhoods. Some had been trapped in zombie mortgages. When the city assessed fines, some residents walked away.

South Bend, where about 45 percent of residents are in minority groups, has one of the highest eviction rates in the country. The city has yet to study the impact of the program on black, Latinx or low-income communities, but Buttigieg, in his political memoir, *Shortest Way Home: One Mayor's Challenge and a Model for America's Future*, writes that "the most important impact of the effort was unquantifiable. Hitting such an ambitious goal made it easier for residents to believe we could do very difficult things as a city, at a time when civic confidence had been in short supply for decades."

...

Hussle's voice booms from cars stopped at Crenshaw and Slauson. His face is on T-shirts worn by the men and boys walking the streets. On another corner, his face stares at traffic from a mural on the wall of a bank. In the global rap world, Kendrick Lamar may be king of L.A., but even in death, Hussle rules over Crenshaw.

The Marathon store was the face card in a broader business plan, which now includes a co-working space, a business incubator and a STEM lab. "If [South L.A.] is to ever be in the condition it deserves — if our people are to ever be treated the way they deserve to be treated — we have to own and build it for ourselves," said Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who represents Crenshaw on the Los Angeles City Council, after Hussle's death.

Hussle's business partner, David Gross, declined to be interviewed for this story, but he has publicized his fight against the city on social media. His plans for the Marathon Clothing store location: a mixed-use project called Nipsey Hussle Tower. This permanent memorial will serve as both a tribute to the neighborhood and a send-up of outside forces vying for control. Those forces may prevail, Jones says, "but the question is, are we going to allow it to happen, or are we going to fight?"

As Hussle would say, "The marathon continues." ■





PLAYMATE
**SERENITY
RAINE**

Photography by SinnStax Photo + Media | @Sinnstax
PR Ratnip Productions | @ratnipproductions



PLAYMATE







We're happy to have you featured in Playboy! Can you give us a bit of a background on your career as a model and where it all started? I started modeling five years ago for contortion and aerial arts photo sets. I never considered myself someone who could be a model, but I loved creating shapes with my body and found so much joy in these photoshoots. I have my bachelor's degree in Film and Media and as a television and film producer, I have a behind-the-camera insight into framing and mise-en-scène. I have carried that knowledge over as I've become more comfortable in front of the camera and began taking my modeling career more seriously over the past year. I love working with photographers that strive to tell a story through their photography because I am a storyteller at the end of the day. I love the teamwork between a creative photographer and model that embody the saying, "a picture says a thousand words".

Having a full schedule must make it difficult for you to get much alone time, talk to us about the top 3 must-dos to ensure you fit in some well-deserved downtime? Scheduling is key, when I am starting to feel overwhelmed with my full schedule, I find it so useful to write out my week in 30-minute increments so I can visually see where I have time to sit down and relax. This helps me realize I have more time available than I think I do when all of the dates and times are just rattling around in my head. I have learned the power of "no." Learning to say no to things that don't serve me has become crucial to finding balance in my life. I am someone who always wants to go above and beyond for others, but I cannot fill someone else's cup if mine is empty. My final must-do is the "Do Not Disturb" setting. My phone is just as much of a timewaster and can steal my downtime more than anything. Setting my phone to "Do Not Disturb" or even turning it off for a day helps me disconnect from external factors and develop a deeper connection with myself.

What does it mean for you to be seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman? When I think about being seen as a strong, intelligent, ambitious woman I think about my younger self. I think about that shy, insecure version of myself who wanted to break out of her shell so desperately

and be seen for all of her worth. I work hard every day to make my younger self proud. It is a beautiful thing to be seen as a strong, intelligent, and ambitious woman, but I wasn't truly living that way until I believed it myself. A strong woman can handle life's challenges as opportunities, an intelligent woman knows the power she holds, and an ambitious woman takes every day by the horns. I've fought like hell to not only embody this, but to believe it in my heart.

What are some of the biggest misconceptions people have about what you do? The biggest misconception people have is that I am not planning ten steps ahead for my future. I have a bachelor's degree in film and media arts, and I am currently climbing two career tracks as a showgirl/model and film/television producer. I invest in my future and have plans to continue to shape my career going further with the hopes to someday combine the two careers I've built. I am incredibly goal oriented and strive to learn every day how to build the life I want for myself. It can be incredibly insulting to hear people say things such as "You need to plan for your future, you know you won't be beautiful forever." I always respond, "Good thing I'm stacking up my Roth IRA while I still am." That usually puts them in their place.

What does freedom of self-expression mean to you? I could not imagine a life without the freedom of self-expression. I have always considered myself an artist and self-expression are how artists tell their stories. Even down to the wardrobe I wear from day to day is an expression of who I am that day to the world. Self-expression is unique to every person and the way people express themselves one day can be completely different the next because every day we are expressing the side of ourselves that needs to face the world that day.

We absolutely love your Instagram, your content is very dynamic, inspirational, and downright sexy, could you perhaps tell us what your personal experience as an influencer has been like? Being an influencer has been an interesting world to navigate. You have to be on top of trends, what each platform is pushing, times of day to post and engage with other content creators. Sometimes social media can feel

like an additional job in itself. Whenever it becomes overwhelming, I try to switch my perspective. I don't "have to" post on social media and engage with my audience, I "get to" which is pretty awesome. I love the audience I have created, and I have learned to set boundaries around being an influencer to avoid burnout such as taking one day off of the site every week, scheduling posts in advance and limiting the people who have access to direct message me.

3 things that you can't go a day without. Coffee, music, cuddles from Koda (my boxer pitbull).

What about those crazy DMs you must receive! Care to share a few funny stories regarding those? At one point I actually created an entire Instagram page dedicated to crazy DMs. I would create a graphic that made it look like an inspirational quote and the juxtaposition of the graphic and the quote were always hysterical. One of my favorites that I dedicated a post to be a DM I had that read "I'd eat dog food out that ass." I of course never responded. Two years later I received another DM from the same man, "I'd eat dog food out that ass." It's honestly a great opening line and I appreciate the dedication.

Now we're sure you experience a lot of male attention on and offline, any advice you would like to give to men out there who are hoping to catch your eye the right way? Make me laugh. It is honestly that simple, of course, I want someone who is passionate, creative and chasing their own goals and dreams. As a dreamer who works tirelessly to make their dreams a reality there's not much sexier than a man who is also chasing dreams of their own. However, at the end of the day I am a silly, goofy person. I need someone who can "yes, and" my bits and make me laugh so hard I awkwardly snort. The best way to my heart is quick wit with a good sense of humor.

What is the absolute worst thing a man can do to completely put you off? Condescension is the least attractive quality a man can have. It is an immediate turnoff. I feel like everyone has a perspective to offer the world that is unique and beautiful but when you believe your perspective is supe



PLAYMATE



rior, I lose all interest. Learning from one another is one of the best things about the human experience and condescension makes that impossible.

That said, what advice would you have to give to all women out there when it comes to love and relationships? Love. Relationships. It comes to love. Life gets messy and you need someone who is willing to go through the trenches with you. You want someone who takes interest in your life, who motivates you to be a better person, and who takes the time to grow and work on themselves. Always fight for what you want. If finding a resolution, be willing to compromise sometimes despite what everyone tells you. I promise, 3 a.m. is not always the best time to resolve an argument. You want someone who makes you say, "I like you and I want to be with you" while you wait for the right person. It's a bad thing either. You don't need a man to be a strong, intelligent and ambitious woman. The right relationships will honor those who are strong and intelligent.

Thank you so much for sitting down with us and letting us get to know you! Any last words for our readers out there? Never stop striving for your dreams. I know the things and relationships that you want to have. Be aware of what takes your time. You are worthy and deserving of a happy success. I know I am. I have to change your perspective. Everything is possible. I get there.

THE PLAYBOY SYM POS IUM

Is Hollywood keeping up with the changing mores of contemporary sexuality? In a time of simultaneous sex positivity and panic, we wanted to investigate how moviemakers are handling our country's sexual reawakening—especially when it comes to female sexuality on the big screen. So we tapped Franklin Leonard—founder of the Black List, Hollywood's heralded community of screenwriters and script buyers—for some help. What follows is a titillating survey of sex, cinema and the female gaze by the Black List's director of community, Kate Hagen. Accompanying Hagen's words: three never-beforepublished illustrations by artists exploring the act of sex, hand-selected by digital gallerist Love Watts.

WORDS BY **KATE HAGEN**

ART CREATED BY **LOVE WATTS**

How were you first seduced by cinema?

My relationship with film began long before I could name the mesmeric desire I felt every time I turned myself over to 100 minutes of flickering passion on the screen. It wasn't until adolescence, when I started to actively seek out any movie on cable with a strong sexual content warning, that my nascent affection for film blossomed into an eternal obsession. And once I was finally left alone to watch what I wanted, I became a cinematic-sex sleuth.

I sought movies such as *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*, *Bound*, *Wild at Heart*, *The Last Seduction* and *Crash* (David Cronenberg's version, of course) solely for the sex. I became entranced not only with thrillingly new perspectives on romance, relationships and intimacy but with the complex emotional narratives around them. I became addicted to the nervous fluttering in my belly when the camera pushed in on two faces I loved, their bodies clutched in electrified anticipation before a climactic fuck. I perfected the art of searching *TV Guide* listings by actor to find the finest filth the Encore Romance channel could offer on a Saturday afternoon. (Remember *Damage* with Jeremy Irons and Juliette Binoche?) I spent hours of trigonometry class daydreaming about whichever actor beguiled me at the moment. That complete list is unfit to print in any medium, but I will admit I was hot for Alan Ruck long before *Succession*.

Even now, nothing thrills me more than a great sex scene. The problem is, the steamiest sex I've seen in years, outside of porn, occurred in the sixth episode of HBO's *Euphoria* — not in a theater. With its tender, trembling Halloween tryst between the characters played by Barbie Ferreira and Austin Abrams, *Euphoria* gave me something I'd never seen before, even as a slut for cinematic smut: a fat woman receiving oral pleasure to the point of climax without it being a punch line or a punishment for her or her paramour. While I was thrilled to be consumed by a scene starring someone who looks like me, it reminded me how long it had been since I'd seen a film that made me feel even remotely the same way.

A spectacular sex scene appeals to our lusting lizard brains, but everything that unfolds around the fucking is what invites audience members to invest and empathize with the characters: the tight clasp of Linda Hamilton's and Michael Biehn's hands during their pivotal coupling in *The Terminator*, or the sobering POV shots as Jennifer Jason Leigh bids adieu to her virginity in *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*. Through sex, we're able to gaze at our most beloved stars during moments of exceptional vulnerability, allowing deeper emotional connections — ones that can validate our own desires.

My love for on-screen erotica made me open to a variety of sexual perspectives long before I could experience them in reality. Even so, it took me three decades to feel represented sexually in film. If the most ubiquitous form of storytelling doesn't feature people to whom we can relate in their enjoyment of carnal satisfaction, how could we ever feel worthy of such a thing in real life? How could we believe we should ask for it?

I've been troubled by the state of sex in movies for the past few years. My fears are confirmed by data from IMDb: Only 1.21 percent of the 148,012 feature-length films released since 2010

contain depictions of sex. That percentage is the lowest since the 1960s. Sex in cinema peaked in the 1990s, the heyday of the erotic thriller, with 1.79 percent of all films featuring sex scenes. That half-point decline is massive in relative terms, considering almost four times as many films have been released in the 2010s as in the 1990s.

Studio releases simply aren't keeping up with the conversations about sex, gender and relationships that have been amplified by Generation Z's progressive attitudes and a #MeToo-driven cultural reckoning. Mainstream film surely isn't representative of the kinds of love and sex I experience in my life as a bisexual woman. We've only begun to flirt with respectful depictions of queer sex, kink and sex work on-screen, but those stories often live and die in the art houses. Countless nuanced perspectives remain unexplored by studios.

As I investigated the state of sex in cinema, I became frustrated with the attempts to assign blame for the slump. Scapegoats include the rise of streaming tube sites and smartphone dependence. But like the complexities of human attraction, the factors that led to the decline of sex in movies are intertwined with our own media history — both as individual viewers and as a collective audience that isn't getting laid as often as we did 20 years ago.

According to a November 2017 article in *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, American adults had sex about nine fewer times per year in the early 2010s than adults in the late 1990s. A 2016 LinkedIn study determined that entertainment is the top industry for young workers, which suggests we may be seeing less sex at the movies because Hollywood is full of undersexed millennials. (And why not blame another cultural catastrophe on millennials?) But that theory falls apart when you consider that the six major studios are run by baby boomers and Gen-Xers — who reportedly have more sex than the younger cohort. If industry gatekeepers are so sexually active, shouldn't there be more sex on release slates?

Consider the most successful erotic thriller ever made: Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction*, which grossed more than \$155 million domestically and was nominated for six Academy Awards, including best picture, in 1987. With its chaotic sex, Oscar nominated performance from Glenn Close ("I won't be ignored, Dan" still haunts me) and controversial climax, *Fatal Attraction* gained the kind of cultural ubiquity now reserved for franchises and IP-driven tentpoles, not middle-budget adult dramas.

To further contextualize *Fatal Attraction*'s success, its adjusted domestic box office is nearly \$360 million. If released in 2019, it would be the year's sixth-highest-grossing domestic release, behind four Disney films and one Sony/Marvel/Disney crossover. There's simply no way a movie like *Fatal Attraction*, with its languorous erotic intrigue and troubling morality, could compete with a Marvel giant in our current landscape, nor gain the same awards heat.

Beyond stories with explicit eroticism, five of the 100 all-time highest domestic grossers — *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *Deadpool*, *Forrest*

Opposite page: Senju,
Seijo (Holy Woman),
2019 D gita, painting





Joyce Lee, Tiebreak, 2019
Watercolor and colored
pencil on Kraft paper

Gump, *Skyfall* and *Twilight: Breaking Dawn—Part 2* — feature depictions of sex. At five percent, this list over-indexes when compared with the percentage of sex scenes in all movies, but with alien sex, superhero sex and vampire sex, these movies are not representative of anyone's sexual experiences (I imagine). What's more, not a single female director is responsible for these titles.

The exceptions to the major studios' sex strike are the adaptations of *Fifty Shades of Grey*, EL James's problematic fantasy about the luxury of heteronormative submission. The first *Fifty Shades* film — and the only one lensed by a woman, Sam Taylor-Johnson — grossed more than 10 times its \$40 million budget. In total, all three films in the franchise made more than \$1.3 billion worldwide, without showing a single penis.

Given the paucity of narratives about sexual fantasies centered on female desire, I can appreciate how the series pushed the envelope. But can the chemistry between Dakota Johnson and Jamie Dornan begin to compare with the incendiary attraction between Close and Michael Douglas? Pushing even further, the last notable theatrical release to receive an NC-17 rating was 2013's *Blue Is the Warmest Color*. Scenes of graphic unsimulated sex, such as those in *Anatomy of Hell* and *Nymphomaniac*, remain the territory of auteurs and international filmmakers who can leverage critical clout to get into festivals. Such releases sometimes make it to streaming platforms (for example, Gaspar Noé's *Love*, now on Netflix), but they aren't the cinephilic fodder they were just a decade ago.

As streaming platforms continue to dominate, new possibilities for adult content are emerging. Amazon's Jennifer Salke has partnered with Nicole Kidman to create a new house brand of "sexy date night" movies for Prime members. We have to consider that one of most plausible explanations for the cinematic-sex decline is the increase in sex on television. Should you ask your friends about their favorite recent depictions of sex, I imagine most will reference the small screen. Sex has made shows such as *Vida*, *Outlander*, *Euphoria* and *Pose* must-see television. The discourse around TV's steamiest moments — from bold thirst tweets to erotic GIFs — feels more pervasive than any cultural conversation about sex in film.

If we're living in the era of peak TV, shouldn't that suggest peak TV sex? Despite the earlier examples, not quite. Since 2000, sex scenes on television have tripled — to 0.06 percent. From 2010 to 2019, the percentage of movies with sex scenes was 20 times that of TV shows, at a time when television production outpaced film production by a ratio of about 13 to one. If we look back to the 1990s, the so-called peak decade for movie sex, data show that sex in film outpaced sex on TV by a staggering rate of about 60 to one.

While there may be more sex on TV today compared with 2000, the halcyon days of XXX late-night programming have come to

an end. In 2018, HBO pulled *Cathouse*, *Real Sex* and other adult programming from its broadcast and streaming services. This summer, the world lost erotic pioneer Patricia Louisiana Knop, who, along with her life and business partner, Zalman King, produced a carousel of pay-cable carnality throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Together they created the lushest sexual-fantasy films to hit the mainstream, including *9½ Weeks*, *Two Moon Junction* and *Wild Orchid*, plus *Red Shoe Diaries*, which premiered on Showtime in 1992.

Red Shoe Diaries focused on the complexities of desire in a patriarchal, post-AIDS world. Bounty hunters, architects and doctors narrated their own stories of "love, passion, and betrayal" in letters sent to Red Shoes (played by David Duchovny), a wounded lothario who gets his kicks from their lurid tales. To kids of the 1990s, *Red Shoe Diaries* evokes sexy, synthwave role-play scenarios sponsored by Spencer's Gifts. But I would argue it had more progressive, thoughtful explorations of passion in its first season

than in any premium-cable series since. It wasn't surprising, then, when I learned the show was produced in part by women, as was *Real Sex*. In the quarter-century since Knop and King's series debuted, we haven't come far in our depictions of non-heterosexual, non-vanilla sex in popular entertainment — or, more specifically, popular entertainment that isn't pornography.

I will admit cinematic sex satisfied my voyeurism only until I discovered the work of adult maven Joanna Angel, a former sex-advice columnist for *Spin*. Angel's brand of altporn features goth babes of all sizes along with approachable hunks such as Tommy Pistol. Through her Burning Angel banner, I realized that porn could be much more than vapid nymphets and hung studs, especially with a woman in the director's chair.

Porn has always occupied a different part of my imagination than movie sex; the adult industry has its own celebrities, awards circuit and cinematic language that is both reflective of and totally unlike Hollywood. Equating the two industries undermines the talented performers in both worlds.

Hollywood's influence, and its current failure to present diverse perspectives on pleasure, is apparent on Adult Time, a paid subscription streaming service that bills itself as the Netflix of porn. Featuring more than 100 curated channels and 50,000 videos, Adult Time is the brainchild of Bree Mills, a queer female pornographer whose work includes everything from a lesbian-themed *Miami Vice* homage to a trans reimagining of *Thelma & Louise* to a kinky parody of the musical *Annie*.

Signing up for a trial of Adult Time this spring was the most revelatory experience I've had with porn since discovering Burning Angel. There, I watched real bodies — bodies with acne, cellulite and stretch marks; bodies historically valued

To deny the essential role of sex in cinema is to deny a core truth.

as less than desirable in mainstream storytelling of all kinds; bodies denied on-screen pleasure in Hollywood as well as adult films — experiencing real bliss. Scouring Adult Time’s library, which includes thousands of scenes from porn’s golden age, it’s apparent there are more inclusive, feminine gazes in adult content than ever before. You just have to be willing to look beyond Pornhub.

More than half the nominees for best director at the 2019 XBIZ Awards were women, which represents far more gender diversity than any directing category during major awards season. Since the 1990s peak of cinematic sex, porn made for, by and about women (and trans, nonbinary and other gender-nonconforming folks) has unquestionably improved and diversified. This was long overdue, and I wouldn’t trade porn’s progress for better Hollywood-produced erotica, but mainstream filmmakers could learn how to frame, block and light cinematic sex scenes from Adult Time.

Depending on whom you ask, valuations of the global adult industry range from \$5 billion to \$97 billion. Pornhub reported 33.5 billion global visits in 2018; if we compare this to 2018’s global box office returns of \$41.7 billion (assuming the average movie ticket costs \$10), we can estimate that about 4 billion movie tickets were sold in the same time frame. Adult industry aggregator MindGeek (which owns Pornhub, Redtube and YouPorn, among other sites) is currently mining millions of data points from users to craft new content by algorithm, just as Netflix did with *Maniac* and *Black Mirror: Bandersnatch*. Whether this optimized adult content resonates with viewers is yet to be seen, but for me, returning to the Wild West of free pornography after my Adult Time trial felt like eating Vienna sausage after two weeks of bingeing Wagyu beef.

Innovations in the adult industry have also created new technological concerns for any performer who appears nude or simulates sex. A Pandora’s box of deepfake videos and other nascent forms of digital manipulation popped open around 2017 and immediately became popular as a way to reimagine adult content. On Pornhub, a search for “deepfakes” yields no results, but on Redtube and YouPorn, a dozen videos, each buried deep within the uncanny valley, surface. They became harder to watch with each frame, but one clip in particular, starring a superheroine, shook me to my core. If I didn’t know better, it would be difficult to believe it was fake.

For now, the celebrity deepfake market seems focused on exploiting women. When I searched through one such site, not a single video starred a male actor. Female nudity in film has plummeted since its peak of appearing in about six percent of all films in the 1990s to less than three percent of all films in the past 20 years. This still eclipses male nudity, rarely fullfrontal, which appears in only 1.67 percent of all films since 1950. The imbalance of gendered nude scenes was promoted in DeepNude, an app launched last summer that virtually undressed women using neural network technology from online nude photos. While DeepNude was taken down within a day, and measures such as California’s proposed SB 564 (backed by the Screen Actors Guild) could prohibit the creation and sharing of digitally rendered sex scenes without the performers’ consent, no single federal law protects against deepfake pornography.

The war over how our most intimate moments are digitally disseminated will be waged in our lifetime, with private citizens soon to face the same concerns as celebrities when it comes to how they’re represented online. In the meantime, Hollywood has responded to performers’ concerns about filming sex scenes with the creation of a new crew position: the intimacy coordinator. Just as stunt coordinators ensure that a balletic action sequence won’t injure actors, an intimacy coordinator ensures that actors feel safe and comfortable while filming intimate scenes.

Alicia Rodis, co-founder of Intimacy Directors International, is currently working with SAG-AFTRA to create guidelines for shooting sex scenes while overseeing the sets of shows like *The Deuce*. *Euphoria*’s intimacy coordinator, Amanda Blumenthal, no doubt had a hand in creating the scene between Ferreira and Abrams that had me scouring Tumblr like it was 2007. With the off-age actors playing high school juniors, the scene could have read as exploitative or gratuitous. Instead — thanks to Blumenthal’s presence, I imagine — their coupling felt raw and relatable. It thrilled me on a visceral level.

When I was the age of Ferreira’s character on *Euphoria*, I was terrified someone would find out about my film-sex fascination. I didn’t want to be the stereotypical hypersexual fat woman, who’d been revealed to me in films like *Road Trip* as the only option for my sexuality. As I’ve grown more comfortable with my sexuality (and seen it reflected in *Shrill*, *My Mad Fat Diary* and other media), I feel grateful for my early erotic adventures across the cinematic canon. Through all sorts of viewing I learned to appreciate every subtle gesture of affection between two actors pretending to be in love, and I came to crave the tactile, electrifying intimacy captured by films such as *The Piano* and *Morvern Callar*.

The feelings-first fervor from my adolescence never fully dissipated. I still seek sex scenes that challenge what I think I want from romance, especially as my own sexual spectrum continues to expand. Hollywood may be failing when it comes to depicting the many facets of contemporary sexuality, but we have also moved beyond the regressive sexual politics of *Manhattan* and *Disclosure* (think *Tangerine*, *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* and *Professor Marston and the Wonder Women*). As more women step behind the camera, we could soon see sex scenes from radical new perspectives that will shift how we think about sex at the movies forever — as long as Hollywood is willing to showcase them.

When we talk about diverse and inclusive storytelling, it must include depictions of our sexual lives and desires. To deny the essential role of sex in cinema is to deny a core truth about why we watch in the first place: desire. Desire to live a more thrilling life. Desire to experience something that fascinates us but is too frightening to touch in the real world. Whether we admit it or not, this is what keeps us coming back to the cinema. Great sex scenes project the secret, unspoken desires hiding in a viewer’s heart onto a screen in front of them. Sex at the cinema has taught me more about my own desires than I could ever have imagined. I can’t wait to be surprised and shocked by the next era. ■

Opposite page: Laura Berger, Flower, 2019. Acrylic on canvas.



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